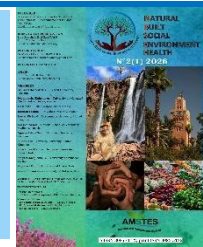


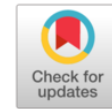


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BOOK REVIEW



Naturens Lys, 1, Fra middelalderens mystik til renæssancens platonisme, by Aksel Haaning, Forlaget Virkelig, 2021, 236 pp., DKK 150 (pbk), 3rd edition, ISBN: 978-87-93499-95-9

Naturens genkomst i europæisk filosofi 400-1250, by Aksel Haaning, Copenhagen, Forlaget Virkelig, 2025, 430 pp., DKK 270 (hbk), 4th edition, ISBN: 978-87-85275-96-7

The Danish historian of philosophy and science Aksel Haaning has written extensively on dissident Christian authors in the Middle Ages, especially with regard to mysticism and the relationship between Christianity and Nature, to expose the foundations of modern European thinking and inspire a change of direction. Most recently the volumes “The Light of Nature, Volume 1, From the Mysticism of the Middle Ages to the Platonism of the Renaissance” and “The Return of Nature in European Philosophy 400-1250”.

The Church Fathers established in the early centuries AD the Christian doctrines which have generally defined Christianity ever since, with a spiritual world strictly separate and above the physical world. This is today often seen as a root cause of the Western mentality of regarding Nature only as a resource to be exploited. But most of the time there have also been less powerful schools of thought which have granted larger importance not just to the Creator, but also to Creation. Even Alcuin of York (c. 732-804), responsible for education under the reign of Charlemagne, complained about one-sidedness of the religious outlook, that is the general lack of interest in “the causes of the things that the Creator has put into Nature”. For mainstream Christianity the pagans were literally the peasants who cultivated and worshipped the earth and nature. The dissident Christian view had one of its foremost representatives in St. Francis of Assisi (1182-1226) who heard God’s voice in the sounds of Nature. A prominent likeminded intellectual was the Franciscan friar Roger Bacon (1214-1294) who regarded all kinds of science as useful to theology, as a support of it. To understand the deepest secrets of Nature is at the same time the highest religious insight. Many Franciscan friars seriously studied Nature, often as medical doctors,

and were later criticized by mainstream theologians for not caring about the dominating religions schisms, such as between Catholics and Protestants. In more recent times, a spiritual view of Nature was important during the Romantic era, its foremost Danish representative was Hans Christian Ørsted (1777-1851), the discoverer of electromagnetism. Of course, during the Romantic era and to the present day many authors and poets have expressed a “spiritual” approach to Nature, sometimes a pantheistic worldview etc. They have not been mainstream, generally, although English poets such as William Wordsworth and Rudyard Kipling have permeated their societies.

Recently, in the West the solution has often been just to pick some non-European philosophy or religion which purportedly attach a higher value to Nature, but Haaning feels an obligation “to dig on the place where we have grown up or feel most at home, in the ground to which we are attached with our Western background”. Haaning stresses that there are many “views on Nature” within legitimate Christian tendencies, the views are often ambiguous, but simplistic. Typically, the alternative medieval thinkers were not in opposition to Christianity, on the contrary they viewed Nature as a further reason to praise the Lord. Hanning notes that this is a very different worldview from that of Creationism, which rather crudely adheres to the Biblical creation story as a recipe for studying Nature, whereas the best of the mystics study Nature first and then in a more metaphorical sense view the wonders of the world as a reflection of a God or as a work of God. The medieval philosophers of Nature would investigate how God’s will is manifested in the world, in defiance of the Church Fathers’ absolute distinction between God and Nature, but still within a Christian framework or identity.

Haaning selects a number of medieval authors for closer examination, such as William of Conches (c. 1090-1154) who believed in an all-powerful God but added that it is not heresy to try to understand and explain how the world created by God works. It is not in conflict with the Bible to study subjects not mentioned in it. William of Conches defines the love of God as the life power behind or inside one common “world soul” for all creatures, all anchored in one God. In the same fashion, another of Haaning’s preferred authors, William’s contemporary Bernardus Silvestris, views humans as part of Nature, its co-worker, with the task of maintaining the life of all creation, in his allegory of the creation of the world, “Cosmographia”. Bernardus’ view survived in the idea of Nature as a “vicaria Dei” in later centuries, when however the poetic and symbolic approach to Nature was gradually being replaced by a more modern scientific one, which was similar to prevailing Christianity in its instrumental view of the created world, separate from human beings.

Haaning points to the important role that the medieval philosophers play in creating an interest in Nature itself. This was a direct foundation for the development of modern science which was inspired by the quest to investigate the work of God, but in this intellectual quest the intimate

connection between Nature and human beings was lost. With the revival of Aristotelianism, Nature was again viewed in opposition to a religious reality. The mediaeval view survived mostly in the alchemist tradition which is also positively re-evaluated by Haaning. He points out that the Inquisition and the witch hunts were perpetrated by “Aristotelian” theologians, now regarded as the “rational” party separating Nature from religion, whereas even Giordano Bruno, today typically associated with the modern scientific outlook, represented the thinkers striving to establish a religious mentality *inclusive of* Nature. This was also the vision of Isaac Newton. The alchemists regarded everyday Nature as a magical wonder of God worthy of study, with human beings as an intermediary between God and Nature, not in a lopsided hierarchy. “Nature is magical on all levels,” Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499) said, but Ficino regarded the visible world as a manifestation of the love of God. And for the alchemists, the study of Nature is not “empty curiosity” leading the researcher away from God, but a way to wisdom and some of the insights that the Church Fathers would only seek outside of Nature. Mediaeval Tuscany was a centre for natural mysticism, Haaning even suggests the great importance of a beautiful nature as context for the direction of philosophical thinking, a point neglected in modern books on philosophy “written at the desk and computer screen”. This deeper impact of landscape on human beings is a fitting conclusion in a book about the care for Nature in human philosophy and religion. A more poetic and mythological view of Nature including mankind, and not excluding Christianity and modern science, could enrich the Western worldview today as well as be helpful for a more balanced development everywhere, and the inspiring sources have now been well presented by Haaning. Let us hope that this may be part of a general European trend.

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