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ONE CHRISTIAN'S REFLECTIONS ON *INTO THE WIDER DREAM*

Michael Cocks and I have never met, although we have been corresponding about synchronicity for over a decade. I believe there was synchronicity in the arrival of Michael's first letter to me in which he raised the question about possible synchronistic relationships between the situations in which he was involved in New Zealand and the milieu in which I lived in America. I wrote back that I thought this might be so; and I had several reasons for saying this. One chief reason was that the day before I received Michael's first letter I had discussed synchronicity with a Roman Catholic priest who was very much influenced by American "New Age" religious thought. But because he had been reading widely in New Age literature with which at that time I was not acquainted, I was not able to understand much of what he told me about synchronicity. My interest in this topic had been aroused, however; and when Michael's first letter about synchronicity arrived, I was ready to develop that interest.

Above all, I liked very much Michael's view that synchronicity is, as he put it, "the divine creativity in our lives." I was pleased with that because I had become a Christian (before that having had no religion commitment) and I was sure (and I still am sure) that I could be satisfied only by an interpretation of, and interest in, synchronicity which were compatible with the orthodox Trinitarian Christianity that had nourished the faith of those authors from whom I was learning about faith during the months when, as it turned out, I was on the threshold of receiving the wonderful Grace of Christian faith--viz., St. Augustine, St. Therese of Lisieux, George Fox, William Law, Soren Kierkegaard, Charles Williams, Evelyn Underhill, and C.S. Lewis. Also, I liked Michael's interpretation of synchronicity as the presence of divine creativity in our lives because, within my spiritual and intellectual experience of first desiring Christian

faith and then receiving that faith and beginning to grow in it, I had, in effect, long known that what is now known as synchronicity occurs in our lives. That is, I believed that all my life I had been having experiences which I thought of as "meaningful and significant coincidences."

Thus, the correspondence about synchronicity with Michael Cocks became a turning point in my interest in synchronicity. That is, before Michael, a priest of the Church of England, wrote me about this topic and before my conversation with the Roman Catholic priest, during my adult years--but also during my childhood ever since I was old enough to reflect on my life experiences--I had noted the occurrence in my life of coincidences that were from my perspective meaningful and significant to me. By saying they were "significant" I mean that they pertained to important (sometimes very important) aspects of my life; and by saying they were "meaningful" I mean that I valued them because they in some way were helpful to me. Having been deeply interested in such experiences since I was about eight years old and having been moved by my correspondence with Michael to reflect upon what I have experienced first-hand with synchronicity, what at present do I believe that I have learned about it?

What follows are some of my present convictions about the nature of synchronicity and its importance in our lives. I offer these my personal hypotheses on this topic. And, of course, as hypotheses these suggestions are in need of development, verification, and supplementation.

1. I suggest that synchronicity occurs in a **variety of spiritual paths** and perhaps is profitably illumined in a distinctive way by each of the great world religions or significant spiritual commitments and the beliefs that guide them. A corollary of this is that at the present time no one of us has all the insight into, or experience with, synchronicity needed to illumine it completely. For example, the Zen person, the Hindu, the Kabbalistic Jew, the Sufi, and the orthodox Christian will have different perspectives on this phenomenon--e.g., about the sources of synchronicity; its legitimate roles in the individual's spiritual life; the ways in which it may be thought of as an a-causal

event, as Jung expressed it; and the ways in which perhaps it is not properly thought of as a-causal. Further, the foregoing may be seen as suggesting that synchronicity, however from any perspective it is explained, has objective existence as part of the human ambience in reality. This also suggests that, perhaps so far as Christianity is concerned, synchronicity is one of the ways in which God gives guidance and aid to the individual.

2. The meaningful, significant coincidences I have in mind **may be composed of a variety of elements**: e.g., diverse kinds of entities and situations; persons and groups of persons; ideas, concepts, and beliefs; animals and plants; emotions, hopes, and aspirations; and areas of study or inquiry. Sometimes these coincidences involve outward events (the encountering a particular person or observing a group of persons on the street as we drive by). And sometimes they involve events solely in our consciousness--e.g., the initial vivid and (as it turns out) fruitful coming together in our mind of two areas which are destined to become of deep concern to us perhaps for the rest of our lives.

3. Sometimes synchronistic events seem to pertain to only the present moment; and sometimes, as we ultimately discover, they pertain to a much longer period. **I have had in my life instances of synchronicity that started long ago and the significance of which has been unfolding during my whole life** (even since childhood), and in some cases have apparently not yet come to an end. Of course, "the synchronistic event" could be defined as one that lasts only a short period-- say, a moment, or an hour. But I suggest that such temporal limitation could not do justice to the real nature and importance of synchronicity.

4. After I became a Christian, and especially during the past several years as my Christian commitment has deepened and my faith has become stronger, I have reflected a great deal on what I have interpreted as the synchronistic events I have found in my life. **I am convinced that these events are "of God."** In part this means that the instances of synchronicity I have known seem to have been given to me. Further, even when it eventually became clear that a particular synchronistic event portended happenings

which I would find difficult to cope with, it nevertheless was easy for me to see them as given to me with kindness and wisdom and never with indifference or cruelty. Obviously this interpretation is decidedly vulnerable. I could be mistaken in my identification of some or all of these events as synchronistic. I will return to this point below.

5. Synchronistic events are **not all equally important**. Some that I have known have been of the highest importance for my life, and others have seemed to be of secondary importance. Perhaps the distinction to be made here is that sometimes one learns about one's life, one's future challenges and opportunities, or one's self directly through the synchronicity per se; while on other occasions one learns from other types of circumstances and what synchronicity is present only mirrors or in some other way accompanies those circumstances.

6. **Is there a possibility of harmful synchronicity?** Or is there a possibility of harming one's self through unwise attention to synchronicity? Personally I believe that both questions are important and need to be studied.

I suggested above that at least some synchronicity is "of God" and is thus good and helpful to us. But if synchronicity is a part of the human natural milieu, then perhaps it might be either "in the service of evil" or expressive of situations that are in themselves indifferent in respect to both good and evil.

I suggest that these are possibilities we must remain aware of, but they are too extensive to pursue further here.

Concerning the possibility of a harmful interest in synchronicity, however, I will make three points. First, a person who is alert to and interested in synchronicity needs to practice restraint in the impulse to associate every situation which may be synchronistic with himself or his own life. He may be observing events which do not have significance for him, although they may have significance for someone else's life. A part of the harm of this ego-centric interpretation of synchronicity is that it might tend to create self-centeredness or interfere with an individual's efforts to grow out of self-centeredness.

Second, a dominant mood, fear, hope or emotional need can lead to a selective noting and interpretation of components of experience during an interval of time. This selectivity may derive from the subjectivity of the individual and have no synchronistic import. Ideally the individual will remain aware of such possibilities and will discipline himself against the too facile judgment that a particular combination of experiences has synchronistic significance for him personally.

Third, the most harmful attention to synchronicity, however, is the Christian's shifting the centre of his religious commitment from the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to synchronicity, which he might combine with other New Age concepts. There is certainly danger in the Christian's looking to synchronistic events rather than to prayer and faith for guidance in his life.

7. Any one perspective on synchronicity is likely to have.

its theory, its explanation as to what synchronistic events are.

These explanations, along with accounts of personal experiences with synchronistic events, have important roles in the study of synchronicity, as do historical events in which synchronicity has perhaps been present. To be sure, so far as anyone world religion or spiritual path is concerned, there will be some controversy as to which events associated with it are examples of synchronicity. Thus, Christians will differ in respect to which of their experiences they want to attribute to synchronicity. And within the history of Christianity--as in each of the spiritual paths--there will be historical events which are at least suggestive of synchronicity. In respect to Christianity, I suggest the following: the appearance of the bright star in the East which led the wise men to the manger; the opening of graves and other uncommon events that followed upon the Crucifixion; and the disciples' meeting with Jesus on the Road to Emmaeus. I suggest that the orthodox Christian is justified in taking this point of view even though some historical/critical inquiry into the New Testament may have led some investigators to the conclusion that these events did not happen but were fabrications by persons who were writing accounts of the birth of Christ, of

the Crucifixion, or the appearance of Jesus after the Crucifixion. For, the conclusions of these historical/critical studies of the New Testament are never to be seen as final, certain, or "definitive." Rather, they are in all cases to be interpreted as at best only "probable, 'I because the conclusions are highly speculative; are based on few data; are the result of idiosyncratic contemporary means of interpreting the few data which are available; and are the product of investigation which has no protection against the effect of the attitude of the scholar who has no capacity for appreciation of the fact that orthodox Christianity must remain committed to the reality of supernatural and divine activity which takes place within nature: --e.g., the angelic Annunciation; the overshadowing of Mary by the Holy Spirit; and the Ascension.

8. But, assuming that these events took place, are these events--which are central to the Christian tradition--to be interpreted as examples of synchronicity? The Jungian characterization of synchronicity, I suggest, does not encompass the Christian understanding of these events. For, while Jung characterized anyone instance of synchronicity as "an a-causal event", **if synchronicity has its origin in the divine creativity** it is not a-causal, though its origin would not be discernable within human sensory experience.

The foregoing does not mean, however, that the Jungian characterization of synchronicity has no usefulness in the now burgeoning interest in the phenomenon of synchronicity. Certainly this characterization has served to draw our attention to the possible importance of the coincidences which often enhance our lives. And it is true that as experiences that occur within the common sense world, the various aspects of anyone meaningful coincidence are not obviously causally related. Nor is the source of the meaningful coincidence, which speaks eloquently to our condition or gives us the guidance or spiritual leavening we need, explicitly revealed to us.

9. I end this statement with an account of one of my experiences which I believe may also be a part of one of Michael Cocks' synchronistic experiences. Some years ago Michael wrote me of the

ginger cat which was killed by Michael's car, an event which he recounts on page ---of this volume. This event, which was a sad occasion for Michael, was part of a series of events which had occurred in Michael's life that day and all of which seemed to mirror his melancholy thoughts at that time. Just before Michael's letter which included this story was delivered to our house, a ginger cat which I had never seen before appeared in our yard and stayed there until I had read Michael's letter. I was not feeling melancholy at the time; but I did notice the presence of the ginger cat and wrote Michael about the coincidence. Then a few months ago Michael sent me a chapter from the MS of *Into the Wider Dream* in which he retold the story of the synchronicity which included the death of the cat. Of course I recognized the story at once. And as I finished reading it for the second time, I realized--with a start--that sleeping peacefully beside me on my desk was Nero, a large black cat which several years ago was abandoned in our neighborhood and adopted by us. Now, Nero had been hurt by an automobile about three weeks before I received Michael's second account of the death of the ginger cat. The veterinarians at the animal hospital to which we took him finally declared that the prognosis for his recovery was "very, very poor": after 48 hours of their skilled treatment, his . psychological and physical condition had not improved, and they were ready to give up on him. As a Christian, however, I believe that other-than-human creatures matter very much to the three-personed God. Has the Son of God not told us that "never a sparrow falls without your Father"?

I prayed at Mass for guidance concerning Nero's future. An initial answer to my prayer, which came at once, was a vivid insight which has been nourishing me spiritually ever since. The answer was that, where this particular petitionary prayer was concerned, my first step should be to ask what I could do to help Nero. And this insight was followed by an answer to that question: I could help Nero by taking him home where he would regain his desire to live and be more relaxed than he was in the hospital. I obtained permission from the very understanding and enlightened veterinarian who owns and runs the hospital to move Nero to out-patient status. (When I took Nero to that particular animal hospital, I did not know that this doctor was very

sympathetic with emphasis on the psychological aspect of animal healing.) I took Nero home, and during the next ten days the dedicated doctors at the hospital and I cooperated in trying to save his life. And Nero himself contributed to his cure by letting me know almost every day about some particular thing that he wanted. For example, the first day at home he stretched out in front an electric heater which I turned on for him; and after that he spent several hours each day relaxing in the heat. After ten days it became clear that the cat's internal organs were restored to normal and that he was healthy and happy again. This experience tells us something of the particularity of synchronicity. There are, of course, instances where nothing helps the animal which has been injured. And there are instances where medical treatment alone is effective. But in respect to Nero, what none of us saw initially was that Nero needed simple things that only his home and his best human friends could supply: emotional security, his accustomed relations to his human friends and in his own home, and freedom to move about as he wished. A series of what I believe to be synchronistic events showed me all this and more about Nero's needs at that time. At the time of his sad experience with the ginger cat's death, Michael had been feeling depressed and the outer events of his life on that particular day mirrored these feelings. Both of the times when I read Michael's account of that day, I was sympathetic, having often had my own feelings of depression. In fact, when Michael's MS came with its second account of the ginger cat :I was living through such a time. But my depression ended with the sudden realization that while I reread Michael's account of his experience with the ginger cat, I had enjoyed the companionship of Nero, whose physical and psychological well being had been restored. And my mind at that moment was filled with the assurance of God's loving care in my affairs. Surely an important aspect of any synchronistic experience is its spiritual effect on the person who has the experience.

The Christian's interpretation of what he takes to be synchronicity in his life is vulnerable in a way that suggests--but is not identical with--the vulnerability of Christian faith itself. On the one hand, both are easily criticized, rejected, misinterpreted. On the other hand the two are not identical, because

we live our lives by faith in God rather than in our interpretation of synchronistic events. It does not matter whether or not my experience with Nero is an example of synchronicity in the Christian life. And, in any event, I have had many other experiences which are much more obviously synchronistic but which I choose to keep personal. What matters infinitely for the Christian is that he takes his commitment to Jesus and hence to the Father and to the Holy spirit as the absolute center of his life. Of course, this is sometimes difficult, and we often fail in this commitment. But with our contrition, our recurring faithlessness and laxness are forgiven. Further, the strength and wisdom given us by the Grace which is the accompaniment of our faith are commensurate with the demands that life makes of us. In the life of faith, synchronicity is one of the many helps that God has given us. And with our faithfulness to Him and our caution in interpreting and assessing synchronistic events, we may, I believe, learn much about this interesting phenomenon. Further, if synchronistic events are gifts from God, then there is mystery in them. And the correlative of the presence of mystery is the need to live by faith rather than by sight and knowledge.

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