

# The Phenomenon of Beauty with a Small or a Capital Letter "B"?

(The Aesthetics of Nature and its Theological Interpretation)<sup>1</sup>

Veronika Iňová

IŇOVÁ, V.: The Phenomenon of Beauty with a Small or a Capital Letter "B"? (The Aesthetics of Nature and its Theological Interpretation). *Studia Aloisiana*, 2019.

This paper introduces practical and theoretical appreciation of the phenomenon of beauty of nature in its theological and aesthetic dimension. It is partly based on a philosophical point of view involving the opinion of a number of experts and following a theological appreciation of this phenomenon. The topicality of theological approach is demonstrated by presentation of the conclusions of a qualitative research, which, by means of an empirical method, examines the ways of human perception of the beauty of nature. The aim of this empirical research was to evaluate whether and to what extent a contemporary man addresses the phenomenon of the beauty of nature, and whether this type of experience also contains the elements of numinosity. The outcomes of this research can be used in pastoral practice.

*Keywords:* beauty of nature, aesthetics of nature, theological aesthetics, numinosity, pastoral practice.

On its theoretical level, the study develops the conclusions of a qualitative research conducted in April and May 2018 in České Budějovice with two target groups consisting of a total of 29 students aged 15-22. The purpose of this research was to empirically support the trend of the increasing attentiveness of students to the topic of beauty that has been observed for

---

<sup>1</sup> This study is a result of the research funded by GAJU (no. 157/2016/H).

several years during the presentation of religious themes at high-school and university environment.

Therefore, the initial question of the research part is: *"In which way or where does a contemporary young person encounter the phenomenon of beauty?"* The results, methodology, and the description of this qualitative research are already included at the beginning of the study, which might be a little unconventional but necessary for its clarity and the following theological interpretation. Theoretical part consists of an extensive discussion about the conclusions presented in the first chapter of the research. It follows the outcomes of the qualitative research stated below and focuses on the search of common signs or features interconnecting various ways of perception of beauty from the perspective of aesthetics and theology. The second chapter is dedicated to the description of several aesthetic and theological phenomena defined by the research as repetitive motifs inspiring the students to mark certain objects as "beautiful." It concerns four main categories: *escape from the everyday world to the safety (chaos x order), fascination by nature, atmosphere of the holy (numinous) and the homeland landscape.* The third chapter deals with the common motif of various ideas of what is considered to be beautiful and what is not, which is associated with the term perception and the related experience of man concerning the interaction with nature. The fourth chapter elaborates the theme of natural beauty in the context of both aesthetics and theology. Its aim is to find a common meeting point of these two subjects. One of possible intersection points could be a new subject called environmental aesthetics, which lacks its equivalent theological "counterpart".<sup>2</sup> The results of the conducted qualitative research together with their theoretical background represent the main output of this study. Thus, the main question of the study is: *"If, thanks to the perception of the phenomenon of beauty of nature, we can find something that would help contemporary people discover the new ways towards God or if it is a journey to find a new respect for nature that surrounds us, as well as for the others or for ourselves."* The answers will be searched not only in the works of leading philosophers, aestheticians, and theologians who are interested in the theme of the beauty of nature but also in the interconnection between the theoretical and practical part of the study, the common aim of which is to find the themes for a dialogue about the beautiful and the holy – two phenomena thanks to which a person can encounter transcendence in his or her common, everyday world.

---

2 Only few theologians deal with the topic of environmental aesthetics. E. g.: HESSEL, D. T. – RUETHER, R. R. (eds.): *Christianity and Ecology*. Cambridge, MA : Harvard University Press, 2000; about the subject of the beauty of nature from a Christian point of view dedicated to Pierre Teilhard de Chardin; in several of his books on the subject of the beauty of nature from a Christian point of view dedicated to J. P. Ondok or M. O. Vácha.

# 1. The Results of Qualitative Research Based on the Use of Empirical Method

The methodology of this qualitative research is based on the work of German authors Martin Lechner and Angelika Gabriel, who used this method to investigate the religiosity of German youth in the years 2005-2008.<sup>3</sup>

This empirical method of research known in Germany as "Photodata"<sup>4</sup> has been chosen because it corresponds with the emphasis of the visual (and also virtual) in the media image of contemporary culture, which considerably influences the world of today as demonstrated by numerous theories and research results.<sup>5</sup> The very method of taking photographs of the research object is also topical because of the fact that, for example, according to Nikolas Mirzoeff, photograph establishes a dialectical relationship between the viewer and the past moment of time and space captured by the image. Apart from these theoretical advantages, there is also a practical advantage that – thanks to its visual nature – the results of the research are more evident comparing to other methods.

The first part of the research presents the following question: "*Where does a young person of today find beauty?*" The members of the target group consisting of 29 respondents (5 students of high school and 24 university students aged 15 – 22) were asked to take a photograph of something that they consider to be "beautiful". These photos also included a short commentary together with personal information and were sent to a special email address. The analysis of this initial part of the research showed that the themes of nature were unequivocally predominant. 23 out of total 29 photographs captured the theme of nature. The following qualitative analysis of data,<sup>6</sup> which found corresponding correlates by the method of open coding, formed these categories: *fascination by nature*, *escaping from everyday world to safety* (chaos x order), *mysterious atmosphere* (holy), *landscape of homeland* and *relations with neighbours* (people, animals, human relationships).

The second part of the research was based on discussions in two focal groups (so-called *focus groups*)<sup>7</sup> with the authors of the photographs about

3 LECHNER, M. – GABRIEL, A. (eds.): Religions sensible Eziehung. The method of „Photodata“ more in detail im Band 6, *Impulse aus dem Forschungsprojekt „Religion in der Jugendhilfe“ (2005 – 2008)*. München : Don Bosco Verlag, 2009, pp. 73 – 78.

4 Apart from M. Lechner and A. Gabriel, this kind of empirical research is elaborated by German theologian Burkard Porzelt, or Dutch theologian Sarah Dunlop.

5 Cf. MIRZOEFF, N.: *An Introduction to Visual Culture*. Praha : Academia, 2012. Where the author deals with the human experience, which becomes still more visual and whose images are not the part of life, but they create life.

6 ŠEĎOVÁ, K.: Analýza kvalitativních dat. In: ŠVAŘÍČEK, R. – ŠEĎOVÁ, K.: *Kvalitativní výzkum v pedagogických vědách*. Praha : Portál, 2014, pp. 211 – 222.

7 It concerns the research method, which uses group interactions within controlled discussion about a chosen theme and which take place in several phases. In: SEDLÁČEK, M.: Ohniskové skupiny a skupinový rozhovor. In: ŠVAŘÍČEK, R. – ŠEĎOVÁ, K. a kol.: *Kvalitativní výzkum v pedagogických vědách*. Praha : Portál, 2014, pp. 184 – 191.

the theme of *beauty*. In the introduction, the photographs taken by the respondents from the first phase of the research were used as a motivation tool together with respective commentaries. They were presented on the screen by the teacher. Anyone could add comments. The following discussion was held in a circle and, at first, the students were told the rules of the discussion group. Within the first discussion with the focus on "beauty", participants were dealing with following questions: "What is the difference between inner and outer beauty?" and "What other forms can beauty have?" Then there was a discussion dealing with the question of material and moral essence of the phenomenon of beauty and its kinds. These questions were asked by the participants themselves, and the group was searching for answers. One of the main conclusions of the discussion was the agreement of the majority that inner beauty is more valuable than outer beauty. "Inwardness" was chosen as one of the key categories. In this "inner" beauty, one encounters something that cannot be described by name, something that transcends the dimension of verbal expression. Some respondents gave their affirmative answer to the question if this experience can be compared to something "spiritual" or "holy". "Outer" beauty was said to be necessary because it makes us stop, perceive and think about the way how inner beauty, and its inwardness, talks to us and why it is so fascinating, shocking and surprising. The defenders of this opinion were from the first group, i.e. from the group of "younger" respondents. The younger they were, the stronger was the interconnection between the experience of beauty and family, friendship and partnership, as their answers revealed.

The second or "older" group (respondents aged 20 – 22) were asked the following questions: "What is beauty?" and "Why does something like beauty exist?" The respondents were asked about the very essence of the phenomenon of beauty. Within this discussion, there were three groups with different opinions in regard to these questions. The first group (3 out of 15 respondents) consisted of those who thought that beauty is not an abstract term but a concrete reality reflected in family relationships or love (moral good). The second group (5 respondents) was formed by those who defended the opinion that beauty is abstract, transcendental and difficult to describe, and that it is a quality present mainly in nature or art. The third group consisted of the respondents who agreed with neither of these approaches (3 respondents) or saw both approaches as interconnected (4 respondents). The beauty of nature in the photos invited them to understand beauty as a phenomenon, which is only one of general categories or the real properties of the world around us. Via their dialogue, the goal of both focus groups was to develop the parent categories of the research results. The following theoretical study will deal with their description in the context of the data identified in the qualitative research and from the point of view of aesthetics of science and their subsequent theological interpretation.

## 2. Models of the Evaluation of Beauty in the Nature

In order to provide the three main categories (*fascination by nature, escape from everyday world to safety (chaos x order) and the landscape of home*) with theological context, the paper mentions the comparison of three experts on these phenomena.

### 2.1 The Theory of Common Chaos and Order

The notion of natural beauty is elaborated in the work of Czech theologian and philosopher T. Machula, where he explains the dichotomy of chaos and order by various translation of the word κόσμος, which includes, apart from commonly used meaning of universe and the world as a whole, also the meaning of order. This order corresponds with the biblical report about the creation of the world, in which God creates the world by organising the chaos (Gn 1:4.6-7; 1:9-10; 1:14.17-18). The created world then praises God (Psm 69:35; Psm 148:7) as the creator of good and beautiful world, which represents one of other meanings of the word κόσμος. This is where T. Machula finds the relation between goodness and beauty that were inserted by God in his creation to form harmony and order of the wholeness of the world.<sup>8</sup>

In his book *The Phenomenon of Man*, French philosopher and scientist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin describes the diversity and unity of the primordial material of cosmos. From the wholeness of universe, he proceeds to the minute atoms that create the unity and, in their minuteness, also the immense amount of material. The smaller they are, the more their number grows. They are united by the fact that their shapes are properly calibrated, so that their effect on their viewers is of too uniform nature.

According to de Chardin, all material is reduced to one form of substance here.<sup>9</sup> This exactness and continuity, which, in contrast to abstract shape, does not provide the viewer with a sufficiently thrilling experience, shows the way, in which we can evaluate the beauty of nature in a range from its macroscopic expression on the night sky to the microscopic clusters consisting of cells and atoms. Similarly to the fractal art described above, the chaotic diversity is gradually formed and harmonised into one order of God's creation. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, the author of this idea, comments on it in the following way: *"In such universe, where everything struggles to*

8 MACHULA, T.: *Filosofie přírody*. Praha : Krystal OP, 2007, pp. 10 – 11.

9 TEILHARD DE CHARDIN, P.: *Vesmír a lidstvo*. Praha : Vyšehrad, 1990, pp. 36 – 37.

*gradual creation of spirit elevated by God to final unity, the material reality of each work gains the value of consecration and unity with God.*<sup>10</sup>

## 2.2 Fascination by Nature

In addition to the “vertical axis” of the religious fact described above, which is also called “divine” or “supernatural” and around which everything is established and organised, Czech theologian Karel Skalický also refers to the “horizontal axis” of the religious fact. According to him, this “covers the whole world, which thus becomes a factor mediating experience and the experience of the sacred.”<sup>11</sup> Everything here, according to K. Skalický, can become the bearer of God’s revelation: heaven, earth, water, plants, animals, as well as human beings. Thanks to this horizontal line, there is a so-called break level, which can “transform[everything] from being unremarkable to being sacred.”<sup>12</sup> K. Skalický affirms that every such an experience is submerged into a kind of special atmosphere of solemnity, which connects the terrifying (tremendum) and the stunning (fascinans), as it is elaborated in a more detailed way by R. Otto in his work “Das Heilige”, where these phenomena are described as interdependent units, generating irrational experience of the sacred.<sup>13</sup>

## 2.3 The Atmosphere of the Mysterious (or Numinous)

The effect of the mystery that is associated with the perception of something scary and terrifying, but what a man is mysteriously attracted to and delighted by, is described by R. Otto in the following way: “Mystery is not only admirable, but also wonderful. Not only is it confusing, but also it enralls, scandals, thrills, and sometimes it is stepping up to the rapture and up to the ecstasy; such a dionysian effect can be sacred.”<sup>14</sup> We can encounter this experience in the most diverse symbols in art and nature. R. Otto suggests that our rational being is hidden behind the highest aspect of our nature, which may be brought up in mystical rapture due to the experience of numinosity.<sup>15</sup> Although none of the respondents directly confirmed the experience of this highest degree of sacredness, there were several responses that showed the moment of encounter with an unexplained, transcendent reality.

10 TEILHARD DE CHARDIN, P.: *Místo člověka v přírodě*. Výbor studií. Praha : Svoboda - Libertas, 1993, pp. 114.

11 SKALICKÝ, K.: *Po stopách neznámého Boha*. Svitavy : Trinitas, 2003, p. 129.

12 SKALICKÝ, K.: *Po stopách neznámého Boha*, p. 129.

13 Cf. OTTO, R.: *Posvátno: iracionalita v ideji božství a její poměr k racionalitě*. Praha : Vyšehrad, 1998, p. 45.

14 OTTO, R.: *Posvátno*, p. 45.

15 Cf. OTTO, R.: *Posvátno*, pp. 49 – 50.

## 2.4 The Landscape of Homeland

The newly found phenomenon of theological reflection about natural beauty could be referred to as “theology of the landscape”.<sup>16</sup> This theme is very close to believers, as it will be demonstrated by the results of the empirical qualitative research in the first chapter of this study. However, why landscape is the place in which we feel so well? Landscape is a place with which soul has an intimate relationship. It can be influenced by culture, education and society in which we live; the idea of landscape is connected to the feelings of safety and security. According to Marek Vácha, the essential motif is the fact that landscape speaks to the soul in comprehensible language. Maybe, also because of this, we can find repetitive elements there: sea, mountains, sunset, forests, blue sky, etc.<sup>17</sup> It is mainly about the encounter with God’s presence somewhere in the heart of a man. The fact that we are touched by the atmosphere of a certain place or landscape is, for M. Vácha, the legacy of something that is common to the whole humankind.<sup>18</sup> It is something that people from all over the world understand, regardless of their religion or denomination. It is about encountering something that is inherent to us, that touches our deepest memories, dreams, imagination, and our personal and shared spirituality.

## 3. Perceiving the Beauty of Nature

The way in which we perceive the beauty of nature is strongly influenced by the cultural and historical context as well as by the geographical conditions in which we live. There was a different view on nature in ancient times because nature was an indispensable part of human everyday life; it was the place of work, living and rest. It is possible to say that this was the last time when man lived in harmony with nature. Because of the medieval struggle to overcome this “obsolete style” and, even more importantly, thanks to the emergence of city culture, nature started to be moved aside, up to the degree that it was seen as an ugly and dangerous place in the early modern era.<sup>19</sup> The hope to re-establish the relation between man and nature came with romanticism as a reaction opposing the materialism of the Enlightenment and uncritical belief in technology. For the people of the twentieth century, it was very difficult to

16 More on this topic e. g. NOBLE, I.: Embodied in theLandscape: How Places We Inhabit Shape Our Theology; ŠTĚCH, F.: Here I am: A Prolegomena to Theology of theLandscape; In *Communio Viatorum. A Theological Journal*, LIX 2017, 11, Published by The Protestant Theological Faculty of Charles University in Prague. Prague : 2017.

17 VÁCHA, M.: Půst smyslů a paradoxy polární země. In: RECHLÍK, K. – HANUŠ, J. – VYBÍRAL, J. (eds.): *Sensorium Dei. Člověk – prostor – transcendence*. Brno : CDK, 2013, pp. 31 – 32.

18 VÁCHA, M.: Půst smyslů a paradoxy polární země, p. 33.

19 Cf. STIBRAL, K.: *Proč je příroda krásná? Estetické vnímání přírody v novověku*. Praha : Dokořán, 2005, pp. 25 – 37.

find the way between these two extremes. Turning back to the opening of this short historical description, we can declare that we can observe the process of re-establishment of the relationship between man and nature only in the past few decades.

### 3.1 Perceiving the Beauty of Nature from the Perspective of Environmental Aesthetics

The representatives of Czech environmental aesthetics: Karel Stibrál, Ondřej Dadejík, and Vlastimil Zuska find the source of this new approach in several facts: science, art, ability of aesthetic perception and evaluation, geography of the environment, cultural and historical context, religion.<sup>20</sup> According to them, these aspects then influence the way of our perception of nature and its evaluation. Some theories refer to the reciprocity between the way of perception of natural beauty through the measures of artistic work (norm, value, experience etc.), which we then apply to the work of art or vice versa when we evaluate art according to our experience with nature. Both of these phenomena are in a certain "positive tension", which, on the one hand, prevents dogmatic preference of one of them, but on the other hand, it also helps gain more profound insight into the work of art and vice versa.<sup>21</sup> However, in line with the theory of Malcolm Budd, these authors call for the evaluation of nature as nature, not as God's work of art.<sup>22</sup> M. Budd explains this refusal by the idea that Christians perceive the beauty of nature as a part of God's creation so it is about admiring God's work not the work of art or natural artefact. It is also something created "ex nihilo", i. e. from non-existing material, and because of that, it cannot be subject of aesthetic evaluation.<sup>23</sup> M. Budd thus perceives this religious notion of natural beauty as something absolutely different from the admiration of nature as nature.

Marek Vácha, Czech scientist, moral philosopher and theologian, follows the idea of the necessity to find a new, respectful relationship to nature from the perspective of a garden created by God and given to man, in his text "*The Creator and his Creation*".<sup>24</sup> The author uses a metaphor of the painting of famous artist and compares the damage of nature with the damage of this painting. In this way, the viewer loses the opportunity to know the sensitivity

---

20 Cf. STIBRAL, K. – DADEJÍK, O. – ZUSKA, V.: Česká estetika přírody ve středoevropském kontextu. Praha : Dokořán, 2009, pp. 25 – 48.

21 Cf. STIBRAL, K. – DADEJÍK, O. – ZUSKA, V.: Česká estetika přírody ve středoevropském kontextu, pp. 12 – 25.

22 Cf. BUDD, M.: Estetické oceňování přírody. In: ZAHŘÁDKA, P. (ed.): *Estetika na přelomu milénia. Vybrané problémy současné estetiky*. Brno : Barrister&Principal, 2010, pp. 397 – 398.

23 BUDD, M.: Estetické oceňování přírody, p. 398.

24 VÁCHA, M. O.: Stvořitel a jeho stvoření. In: RECHLÍK, J. – HANUŠ, J. – VYBÍRAL, J. (eds.): *Sensorium Dei. Člověk – prostor – transcendence*. Brno : CDK, 2013, pp. 16 –18.



of the painter, his notion of beauty and his talent.<sup>25</sup> The irresponsible behaviour towards nature means that a person robs himself or herself as well as the others of the opportunity to see revealing God in the nature and thus to experience his closeness. How should then Christians behave to the nature and what entitles them to behave to the nature as to the revelation of God?

Vácha finds the answer in the Prologue to the Gospel of John, in which we can read: "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us."<sup>26</sup> It means that God decided to be incarnated because he wanted to save man, who is essentially connected with "material."

A person can distinguish what is beautiful and what is not. At the same time, natural motifs are inserted into artistic motifs so that the audience can get repeatedly impressed by them.

### 3.2 Aesthetic Experience in Comparison with the Religious Experience

For the relevance of qualitative research, the results of which were described in the first chapter, it is necessary to explore the question of the relation between the aesthetic experience described above and the religious experience. General psychology of the process of acquisition of common experience speaks in the same terms as concerning the case of emotional experience, which is preceded by perception through senses. Then it is processed in the central nerve system, in brain, and the result is emotion mentioned above or the experience of something new. In this way, some perceptions, e.g. listening to music or perception of a painting, can always help discover a new experience or they enable us to see the same thing from a new perspective.<sup>27</sup> This experience helps us find our orientation in space and move in it; sight is the most essential sense as it provides us with 80% - 90% of information from the outer world. We thus refer to visual experience, which is necessary for common life and which simultaneously enriches us. Another sense necessary for our orientation is the sense of hearing, which is based on the reception of mechanical vibrations of outer surroundings and thus *"opens the gate of conscious contact with other people and understanding of the pronounced."*<sup>28</sup> However, according to D. Skalický, aesthetic experience is a continual, structured process, in which man experiences a certain development with a distant result. The experience leads to understanding, forms and transforms our personality, and influences our conduct and the manner of experience as was described above. It continues in the line of thinking of

<sup>25</sup> VÁCHA, M. O.: Stvořitel a jeho stvoření, pp. 19.

<sup>26</sup> John 1:14 a.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. VÁCHA, M.: Půst smyslů a paradoxy polární země, pp. 24 - 27.

<sup>28</sup> VÁCHA, M.: Půst smyslů a paradoxy polární země, p. 30.

American pragmatist John Dewey, who described experience as a dynamic, unfinished process. Thanks to this, man keeps gaining new experiences that are formed into the whole of experience afterwards. Thanks to this, people can understand the world better.<sup>29</sup>

With the intention to understand aesthetic meanings, we should sometimes neglect them, turn our face away from them, and focus on the powers and conditions of common, everyday experience, which we usually do not regard as aesthetic. Nevertheless, J. Dewey also classifies the very process of gaining experience as art. In order to understand aesthetics in its definite shape, it is possible to search for it in the events and scenes observed by a sensitive human eye, ear and nose; through these, we can see, hear and smell, i.e. gain the experience by all sensory receptors. This initial experience should be understood in its complexity; which means that it should involve both imagination and rational thinking. One of the examples Dewey uses is the image of burning wood and man observing it with fascination as it is transformed into embers and adding more little pieces to see the next scenery, fascinating colourful drama changing in front of his eyes, in which he participates through his imagination. All of this prevents him from being an uninterested observer and makes him a co-creator of his own experience.<sup>30</sup> The same often happens in other ways of experiencing nature, which was captured on the photographs of the respondents of the further described research.

The above mentioned German phenomenologist and religionist Rudolf Otto describes a specific process of human religious experience, which should be, in his words, referred to as the experience of "numinous" nature, which has its rational and emotional dimension,<sup>31</sup> rather than religious. According to Otto, the comparison between religious and aesthetic experience can be made only a priori and concerns different experience of consciousness. For instance, when we describe a stone as "beautiful" or "terrifying", the subject gets a concrete predicate that is not based on the sensual experience but on aesthetic evaluation. Sensual perception distinguishes the subject according to shape, sound, colour, smell, etc. However, the very meaning is perceived thanks to reason. In order to be able to say about anything that it is "beautiful", we should know the notion of beauty beforehand and this knowledge influences everything since that moment. Although the holy and the beautiful can be known to us, and we can refer to them by words, they still contain moments of irrational ungraspableness: *"In revelation, the holy can be something that is known to us within our emotions, which is familiar, delightful, or dreadful, and which cannot be described in any rational terms"*.<sup>32</sup>

In this way, the sacred preserves the transcendent quality, which is the most natural and thanks to which we can also call it sacredness. This is

---

29 Cf. SKALICKÝ, D.: *Ozvláštnění – fikce – estetická zkušenost*. České Budějovice : Halama, 2017, pp. 76 – 77.

30 Cf. DEWEY, J.: *Art as Experience*, New York : BerkleyPublishing Group, Penguin Group, 2005, pp. 2 – 3.

31 Cf. OTTO, R.: *Posvátno*, pp. 126 – 127.

32 OTTO, R.: *Posvátno. Irracionalita v ideji božství a její poměr k racionalitě*, p. 127.

a sacred experience of the people of the archaic cultures contained in the metaphysical concept of the world and then in the specific representational forms (creation of art).

This presupposition was not considered to be the inherent work of man, as the divine also participated in its revelation to man and enabled to perceive itself in a certain shape or figure. Each religious expression in art represented this relationship and thus enabled the encounter between man and gods.<sup>33</sup> This encounter could be a personal religious experience, on the one hand; on the other hand, it could be a way of perceiving the world and the discovery that the world is a divine work.

## 4. Beauty of Nature from the Perspective of Environmental Aesthetics in Comparison with Historical and Theological Approach

In order to be able to compare or even interconnect this aspect of experience with the expanding aesthetic discipline of environmental aesthetics, we will briefly focus on the development of this area, which is closely related to the change in the way we perceive and evaluate nature.

O. Dadejík<sup>34</sup> dates the transformation of the view of beauty approximately to the middle of the twentieth century. The focus on the artistic aesthetics was shifted to the phenomena that had been regarded as marginal before. Some of these areas were: nature, culture and environment. It marked the emergence of an absolutely new discipline, often called “environmental aesthetics”.<sup>35</sup> According to O. Dadejík, it is a proper way of reaction to climate changes, the emphasis of the necessity to change our attitude to nature and landscape, which are not only utilitarian benefits for survival but have their own aesthetic value. It is not a direction that would determine what is beautiful and what is not, but it is the effort to distinguish between the aesthetics of nature and the aesthetics of artistic objects, and that would also investigate

33 Cf. ELIADE, M.: „Divinities: Art and the Divine“. In: ELIADE, M.: *Symbolism, the Sacred, the Arts*. New York : Continuum, 1985, pp. 55 – 63.

34 Together with K. Stibrál and V. Zuska, the aesthetician and philosopher O. Dadejík belongs to the main experts on environmental aesthetics in the Czech Republic.

35 Environmental aesthetics is a specific branch of philosophical aesthetics, which questions the established attitudes, often ideologically influenced. Some aestheticians consider this branch to continue in line with the former *aesthetics of nature*. It maintains or creates the relationship between people and their environment. (Cf. DADEJÍK, O.: *Environmentální estetika*. In: ZAHŘÁDKA, P. (ed.): *Estetika na přelomu milénia. Vybrané problémy současné estetiky*, Brno : Barrister&Principal, 2010, pp. 376 – 377). The main representatives of the subjects are Malcolm Budd, Allen Carlson a Ronald W. Hepburn.

the problems on the borderline between aesthetics and environmental studies enriched by aesthetic experience and critical view.

What is a relevant theme of this discipline in regard to the research question, is the problem of the method of evaluation of natural objects. While we know how to evaluate the work of art, in the case of the environmental object, Carlson talks about a different "act of aspectation". He created two basic models of aesthetic evaluation, which can be used (with certain restrictions) in the process of evaluation of natural environment. One of them is a so-called *object model*, which observes its qualities of sensual, formal, and abstract character and their relation to the surrounding environment. As the second model, Carlson introduced a so-called *landscape model*, the evaluation of which is based on its visual qualities that are related to colourfulness and the overall form of the image.<sup>36</sup> Being aware of the limits of the first two ways of aesthetic evaluation, Carlson suggests absolutely new way of appreciation, a so-called *environmental model*, in which the viewer is required to perceive the given subject by all senses and afterwards, he or she should experience it as a noticeable foreground and include also all available scientific knowledge from the area of biology and ecology to his or her observation.<sup>37</sup>

Now, we will complement this aesthetic method by historical and theological perspective described by Marek O. Vácha. The author divides them into *utilitarian materialism* approaching nature only as a source of non-renewable and natural resources and economic prosperity, and the second approach called *pantheistic divinisation* of nature, which has, according to Vácha, rather religious than ideological connotations. The latter approach is common in natural and animistic religions and in hinduism with worship of the Mother Earth or incarnated gods who answer various prayers and rituals of the believers by their blessing, be it in the form of sufficient crops for the whole tribe or by the protection against everyday dangers.

In Vácha's view, *Christian approach* to nature offers the middle way where nature is seen as the work of God, and that is why the believers are responsible for their behaviour towards it. In the same way, man is "merely" similar to God and is also his image and the crown of God's creation. God transcends these similarity, includes and transcends all as a Creator.<sup>38</sup> Man then obtains from his Creator the task to "cultivate and guard" the earth that was entrusted to him by God. In addition to that, God also gave man something from his creative art, which enables man to freely decide, create and keep the sense of his mission in regard to all beautiful plants and creatures created by God.<sup>39</sup> Nature is the place where man can meditate and, as Vácha adds, "*read like in the book about God's beauty*",<sup>40</sup> so that, for example, if people cause the

---

36 CARLSON, A.: Oceňování a přírodní environment. In: ZAHŘÁDKA, P. (ed.): *Estetika na přelomu milénia. Vybrané problémy současné estetiky*. Brno : Barrister&Principal, 2010, pp. 389 – 391.

37 Cf. CARLSON, A.: Oceňování a přírodní environment, pp. 391 – 395.

38 Cf. VÁCHA, M. O.: Stvořitel a jeho stvoření, pp. 9 – 10.

39 Cf. VÁCHA, M. O.: Stvořitel a jeho stvoření, p. 14.

40 VÁCHA, M. O.: Stvořitel a jeho stvoření, p. 19.

extinction of a certain vegetable or animal species, it is not only an ecological catastrophe but also a theological one, causing the damage of the One, who reveals himself in his creation. This way, people prevent other generations from knowing God in his full Beauty and in everything he created.

## Conclusion

Now, in the perspective of the conclusions of the qualitative research mentioned above and its subsequent theoretical evaluation, we can ask again the main question posed in the introduction to this study: *“Whether due to the perception of the beauty of nature we can discover something what would help contemporary people discover new paths to God?”; “Or is it the way leading to the respect for nature that surrounds us, to others, or to ourselves?”* Thanks to the field of environmental aesthetics of nature we can answer the second part of this question.

Thanks to the beauty of nature as one of “re-discovered” aesthetic phenomena, many people can become increasingly aware of the urgency of changes of human behaviour that need to be implemented in order to save the nature. Philosophical aesthetics of nature also helped us explain, how the aesthetic experience can intervene and enrich the everyday experience of contemporary man. The study shows that the topic of the beauty of nature is dealt with only by a few experts from the field of theology or theological aesthetics. From the above-described categories that have been interpreted thanks to these rare theological treatises in the contexts the collected empirical data, the conclusion is that the beauty of nature can become a path leading to the experience of transcendence. Let us have a look at the words of one of the participants of a seminar on “religious dimension of education” regarding the issue of beauty:

*“What is “beauty” for me? I see it as a concept of aesthetics, as a property of things going on, places and the like. It is this property that causes that we like something, that we consider something to be nice, perhaps even more than nice, the property that depends in a large part on the subjective sense of evaluation of a person, but there is also the influence of social conventions, historical conditions, a kind of social consensus. Its opposite would be ugly. Everywhere around us there are many beautiful things, places, moments.*

*And “Beauty”? For me, Beauty is not a property, it may not even have any aesthetic value, it is rather an experience, or just a feeling maybe best described as a condition of harmony with soul. A brief moment, unique, unrepeatable that exists now and in this place, and not anywhere else. A condition that is written into the soul of man that he will remember forever. A state of mind that occurs only a few times in a lifetime. That’s beauty for me, without any known reasons.”<sup>41</sup>*

---

<sup>41</sup> Quotation of a student of the subject entitled „Religious Dimension of Education“, here on 14th May 2018. In the private archives of the author.

What more is there to add...? The Beauty with capital "B" opens up a unique dimension of something that we can only consider on theoretical level, but it is something that should be taken seriously, particularly in the area of today's evangelization and pastoral care.

## Bibliography

- BUDD, M.: Estetické oceňování přírody. In: ZAHŘÁDKA, P. (ed.): *Estetika na přelomu milénia. Vybrané problémy současné estetiky*. Brno : Barrister&Principal, 2010.
- CARLSON, A.: Oceňování a přírodní environment. In: ZAHŘÁDKA, P. (ed.): *Estetika na přelomu milénia. Vybrané problémy současné estetiky*. Brno : Barrister&Principal, 2010.
- DEWEY, J.: *Art as Experience*, New York : Berkley Publishing Group, Penguin Group, 2005.
- ELIADE, M.: „Divinities: Art and the Divine.“ In: ELIADE, M.: *Symbolism, the Sacred, the Arts*, New York : Continuum, 1985.
- LECHNER, M. – GABRIEL, A. (Hrsg.): *Religionssensible Erziehung: Impulse aus dem Forschungsprojekt „Religion in der Jugendhilfe“ (2005–2008)*. Band 6, München : Don Bosco Verlag, 2009.
- MACHULA, T.: *Filosofie přírody*. Praha : Krystal OP, 2007.
- MIRZOEFF, N.: *An Introduction to Visual Culture*. Praha : Academia, 2012.
- OTTO, R.: Posvátno: iracionalita v ideji božství a její poměr k racionalitě. Praha : Vyšehrad, 1998.
- SKALICKÝ, D.: *Ozvláštňení – fikce – estetická zkušenost*. České Budějovice : Halama, 2017.
- SKALICKÝ, K.: *Po stopách neznámého Boha*. Svitavy : Trinitas, 2003.
- STIBRAL, K. – DADEJÍK, O. – ZUSKA, V.: Česká estetika přírody ve středoevropském kontextu. Praha : Dokořán, 2009.
- STIBRAL, K.: *Proč je příroda krásná? Estetické vnímání přírody v novověku*. Praha : Dokořán, 2005.
- ŠVAŘÍČEK, R. – ŠEŠOVÁ, K.: *Kvalitativní výzkum v pedagogických vědách*. Praha : Portál, 2014.
- TEILHARD DE CHARDIN, P.: *Místo člověka v přírodě*. Výbor studií. Praha : Svoboda-Libertas, 1993.
- TEILHARD DE CHARDIN, P.: *Vesmír a lidstvo*. Praha : Vyšehrad, 1990.
- VÁCHA, M. O.: Stvořitel a jeho stvoření. In: RECHLÍK, J. – HANUŠ, J. – VYBÍRAL, J. (eds.): *Sensorium Dei. Člověk – prostor – transcendence*. Brno : CDK, 2013.
- VÁCHA, M.: Půst smyslů a paradoxy polární země. In: RECHLÍK, K. – HANUŠ, J. – VYBÍRAL, J. (eds.): *Sensorium Dei. Člověk – prostor – transcendence*. Brno : CDK, 2013.

Mgr. Veronika Iňová  
Faculty of Theology  
University of South Bohemia  
Kněžská 8  
370 01 České Budějovice  
inovavoo@tf.jcu.cz