

A Conference Report: ‘The Role of Beauty in Being and Becoming Human: An Interdisciplinary Perspective’ (19–22 May 2022, Fortna monastery, Prague)¹

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From 19–22 May 2022, an international and interdisciplinary conference took place in the Fortna monastery in Prague. It was the fifth conference³ organised by the University Centre of Excellence: Theological Anthropology in Ecumenical Perspective (UNCE No. 204052 (HUM/012)) project. This project, led by Professor Ivana Noble, head of the Ecumenical Institute of the Protestant Theological Faculty of Charles University, combines post-doctoral and senior researchers with the active participation of doctoral students and a group who go under the title of Other Academic Researchers. It contains some twenty-six people from the Protestant and Catholic Theological Faculties of Charles University, representing Biblical Studies, Systematic Theology, Pastoral Theology, Ethics, as well as the Ecumenical Institute.

However, with this fifth conference, organised jointly with Masaryk University in Brno, the aim was to broaden the scope of the interdisciplinary interaction beyond the disciplines commonly found at theological faculties to include both natural, social, and historical sciences. The specific focus of the conference can be seen in its title: ‘The Role of Beauty in Being and Becoming Human: An Interdisciplinary Perspective’. Although, in the end, Covid and other illnesses meant that not everyone could participate and deliver their papers,⁴ the conference nevertheless managed to bring together scholars from a range of different disciplines. There were in total thirty-seven participants from Prague, Brno, and also from France, the Netherlands, Italy, Ireland, India, and China.

The conference began with introductions from the joint organisers, Professor Ivana Noble, and Professor Jiří Hanuš, professor of history in Masaryk

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³ The four previous conferences were entitled respectively: ‘Contemporary Images of Holiness’ (2018), ‘How Discernment between Good and Evil Shapes the Dynamics of the Human Journey,’ (2019), ‘The Heart in the Heartless World? Struggles for What is Central in Human Life’ (2020, online), ‘The Process of Maturing: Human Childhood and Adulthood in a Theological Perspective’ (2021).

⁴ This was particularly the case with the natural or at least mathematical sciences.

University in Brno. Professor Noble addressed the topic of ‘The Role of Beauty in Understanding of the Human Self, of Transcendence and of What Is and What Is Not Holy’. This introduction also served to contextualise the conference within the broader project, picking up on themes such as discernment and maturing,⁵ as well as the focus on the human being, the subject of the first book under the project.⁶ Professor Hanuš considered the question ‘Does Beauty Have a History?’ whilst also offering some reflections on whether history, or the historical sciences, can be said to have a beauty.

The introductory session was concluded by Professor Anne Marie Reijnen from the Ecumenical Institute of the Institut Catholique of Paris. Professor Reijnen has, among other things, worked on questions of astrobiology and its theological implications, and this aspect of her work was reflected in the title of her presentation ‘Notes on Beauty in Macrocosm and Microcosm: Theology in Conversation with Astro-Biology’, which presented two theses, one dealing with the universal appeal of beauty, and the second arguing for the precedence of paradox over analogy.

The second session of the conference saw two papers under the general theme of intercultural theology, religious studies, and art. First, Dr. Gesa Thiesen, a German theologian resident for many years in Ireland, spoke on two dimensions of beauty, as a reminder of a lost paradise but also as a promise of eschatological fulfilment of the Kingdom to come. She was joined by Dr. Kateřina Kočandrle-Bauer of the Ecumenical Institute of the Protestant Theological Faculty of Charles University, who spoke about sophiological insights into the theme of beauty. Already at least one theme was emerging in the conference, of the relationship between transcendence and beauty and how both are rooted in concrete realities, social, political, and religious.

After these papers, the conference moved away from the directly theological, with presentations by two scholars from Brno. First, Karel Stibrál, head of the Department of Environmental Sciences at Masaryk University in Brno, gave a paper on ‘J.G. Sulzer: The Beauty of Nature between Science and God’. Johan Georg Sulzer (1720–1779) was a Swiss mathematician and worked in the field of electricity, but also wrote a book on *General Theory of the Fine Arts*, a hugely influential work in the field of aesthetic theory in the late eighteenth century, and doc. Stibrál presented Sulzer as an early writer on the relationship between nature and urbanisation.

He was followed by historian Dr. Petr Husák, whose main work is as the owner of a vineyard in southern Moravia, where he has learned to work with traditional methods of viticulture, including the use of horses instead of tractors.

⁵ This will be the theme of the second book under the project, to be published in English, provisionally entitled *The Process of Maturing*.

⁶ Ivana Noble and Zdenko Širka (eds.), *Kdo je člověk? Teologická antropologie ekumenická* (Prague: Karolinum, 2021). A Russian translation is already published: *Кто есть человек? Богословская антропология* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo BBI, 2022), and an English translation is being prepared.

This all combined in his talk on ‘Does Beauty Matter in Agriculture? Landscape, Wine and Horses’. The lecture began with a methodological reflection on his located position as someone with an academic formation (a doctorate in history) and a practitioner and how these combine, before going on to reflect on the role of beauty in agriculture.

The focus of the fourth main session of the programme was on art and beauty, beginning with reflections on French ecclesial art, as reflected in the work of a Dominican priest, Marie-Alain (Pierre) Couturier (1897–1954), offered by Norbert Schmidt, director of the Centre of Theology and Art at the Catholic Theological Faculty of Charles University, and then continued by a contribution on a sense of beauty in music from doc. Martin Flašar of the Department of Musicology of Masaryk University, looking at different aesthetic theories of music.

The next main session of the programme was in the form of a roundtable, in which three participants reflected on the role (or indeed absence) of beauty in their work. The three were doc. Petr Gallus, a systematic theologian from the Protestant Theological Faculty of Charles University, Professor Vít Hlouchek, head of the International Institute of Political Science at Masaryk University in Brno, and sociologist and journalist Dr. Jan Jandourek. It was apparent that beauty was not an obvious category for any of them in terms of their academic work.

The final main session of the conference had as its centrepiece a lecture (unfortunately online) from an Indian Orthodox priest, Fr George M. Kondotra, who is also an artist and psychotherapist, showing how beauty is a unifying theme. Responses to this lecture were given by Pavel Pola OCD, a Carmelite priest and doctoral student at the Protestant Theological Faculty of Charles University, Professor Pavel Hošek from the same faculty, and clinical psychologist and psychotherapist Dr Gabriela Ďurašková.

Apart from the main sessions, the conference also included other activities. There were two short papers sessions, each divided into three groups and with three speakers in each group. The eighteen papers were delivered by doctoral students, postdocs and lecturers from different countries (ten in all) and representing a number of institutions. Topics ranged widely, looking at what happens when beauty is not present, at beauty in the time of war in Ukraine, at different ways of perceiving beauty from patristic times onwards, on beauty and difference and the transformative power and the role of beauty in various settings, to name just some.

The conference also had two less directly academic parts that sought to root the concept of beauty. The first was a walk in Prague, encouraging participants to seek out beauty in the urban landscape and culminating in a guided tour of a recently reconstructed building on Národní třída in Prague, whose architects had sought to draw on existing elements of a number of earlier buildings, linking them in a sustainable and architecturally and visually impressive manner. The second element was an exhibition of a series

of paintings on the Life of Mary by Professor Ivana Noble, exhibited in the church of Fortna monastery.

In conclusion, a few words are in order about the overall impressions of the conference. The interdisciplinary nature of the conference was a positive experience, though it also brought out the difficulties faced in talking across disciplines and across methodologies. Aesthetic concepts may have a relatively established place in the world of systematic theology and the arts, but clearly this is not a category that other, especially social sciences, would feel at home with. At its best, such an experience can lead to challenges both ways, for social sciences to incorporate the category of beauty (which is after all an important aspect of life for many people and many societies) and for those in theology and the arts to reflect on how beauty can be talked about not just in terms of aesthetic theories and concepts but also in terms of practice (liturgical, ecclesial, pastoral, and so on).

Arguments and debates will no doubt continue over the relative degree of subjectivity and objectivity in understanding of beauty, and the debate is not an unimportant one. The medieval theologian and philosopher Duns Scotus (1265/6–1308) introduced a concept that came to be called *haecceitas*, the ‘thisness’, the particularity, of each person, each creature, each thing. This idea was seized on by the British Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844–1889), who saw the presence of God in all things, for all were created by God, or as he puts it in the final lines of his poem, ‘Pied Beauty’, all things ‘He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change: / Praise him.’ In this sense, a key task of theology is to reflect on and reflect the creative and transformative power of God at work in the world, and this conference was an opportunity to engage in that task, sharing with and learning from other disciplines at the same time.

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