**CALL FOR PAPERS**

***Society for the Phenomenology of Religious Experience (SOPHERE) Conference 2023:***

***Religious Experience and the Phenomenology of Nature***

***16th – 19th August 2023***

***(Hosted by the University of Galway and St. Angela’s College, Sligo)***

Submission date: **15th March 2023**

Enquiries and submissions to: conferencegalway2023@sophere.org

**Theme of the Conference**

Faced as we are with climate change, mass extinctions of species, global pandemics, there is probably no more pressing theme today than that of nature. It is, however, not at all clear what we mean by ‘nature’, and whether discourse about nature is even meaningful today. Many speak of the ‘death of nature’ while at another extreme we find the exhortation toward a ‘re-enchantment’ of [by] nature. What the conference aims to explore is the place of religious experience within this our current situation.

Nature philosophy, including environmental ethics, but also the revival in Schellingian themes and the rediscovery within Phenomenology of the question of nature (Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger, Husserl), questions any unidirectional subject/object relation to nature. Nature is that in which we find ourselves as human beings and despite our molding of our environments, according to such a view, the human engagement with the world itself embodies nature. The emphasis on embodiment shows not alone the limits of dualisms, but also the commonality of the human with the natural world in which we are and breathe. The inter-subjective experience of such being in nature and the inter-corporeal being with animals and plants around us is reflected in the sacramentality of religious observance from totemic rituals to the Christian Eucharist.

Inspired by the overcoming of dualisms of body and mind and nature and freedom deriving from the Phenomenology and Schelling, we can re-examine the religious sense of nature as containing sacredness. This religious sense can be understood metaphysically as an intuition of reality appearing as unapproachable. Phenomenologically, the question as to the source of this sense of the inapproachable and sacred can be understood in terms of feelings of awe (e.g., Otto). Not alone can nature be a source or locus of religious experience, but it may also be the case that religious affectivity gives us access to nature beyond the objectifying and instrumentalizing tendencies of Modernity. In this respect, we can think of the phenomenologies of life (Bergson, Tymieniecka, Henry), which explore modes of appearance of nature beyond the dualities of mechanism and vitalism. These accounts draw on – explicitly or implicitly – religious motifs such Christian notion of life as Christ, Vedantic life as Sat (Truth of Being, identical with self-consciousness and fullness), or Islamic God as truth or reality (*al-Haqq*), as well as other concepts across many traditions which are connecting life and nature. These motifs can be understood as compatible with the growing movement of panpsychism in the philosophy of mind (Strawson, Goff, Chalmers, Nagel) and the philosophy of life in biology (Varela, Maturana, Wilson).

Living through a pandemic it is important to attend to the core meaning of the word – *pan demos*, concerning all the people. Just as nature is everywhere, so any discourse about dwelling in nature (eco-logy) must be seen to concern the totality of human experience, in the sense of the full richness of its diversity. One manner in which such diverse experience can be understood is the way in which nature is experienced as a temporal phenomenon. This is clear already in the experience of the cyclicality of the seasons. It is also manifest in the current sense of ecological crisis which draws on a religious sensibility that has remained present in different guises through Modernity, namely the eschatological. In attempting to think nature with respect to religious experience, we are thinking within the intersection of temporal strands: mortal time, conscious time, cyclical, indefinite time, eternal, creative ‘time’. Understood eschatologically or messianically this relation is one in which ending is woven into the fabric of time: time as ending, transforming of past in the present and the opening up of a new future, time of forgiveness, repentance, grace and judgement (*kairos*).

Similarly, in thinking of nature from a specifically Christian standpoint, we are invariably drawn into the thought of Incarnation and Creation. The complexities of both terms indicate ambiguities in the articulation of nature within religious experience. Understood as creation, nature can be understood as a domain of divine bounty to be valued and cared for *or* as an object to be mastered and exploited, while remaining a source of temptation away from the creator. The prohibition on idols emphasised the distance between divinity and nature, making questionable any source of religious experience within nature. The ambiguity here can be seen in the place of beauty which is sometimes affirmed within Medieval philosophy as a ‘transcendental’ (along with goodness, unity, truth), but is more often passed over, something which has been emphasized by such figures as Maritain and von Balthasar. Yet, if the Incarnation is taken seriously as a second creation, then the underlying motif is not power but self-emptying (*kenosis*) and understanding nature in terms of this event is to approach it in its materiality as touched by divine presence. Indeed, it is the Incarnation historically was instrumental in the modification of the prohibition on idols and the re-conceiving of the relation of image to divinity.

A more immanentist account of God and divinity, broadly speaking polytheistic, allows for a less ambivalent account of nature. The “world is full of gods” (Aeschylus) or at least there are domains of gods and spirits – sacred groves, forests, mountain tops – where human experience is confronted with nature as overwhelming, as powerful, as forbidding. Yet, in such accounts there are ways towards the divine, through rituals of cleansing and purification or through ecstatic experiences of possession. Boundaries can be crossed while retaining a reverence for nature as that which has a being in and of itself, which is for the human only as a gift of its own bounty.

Pantheism and panentheism in understanding nature as pervaded by or identical with the divinity, speaks to an experience of participation with nature, which goes further towards a learned fusion with nature, where the full realization of the self is in its incorporation in the divine wholeness.

The experience of nature and divinity is reflected in divisions within society and politics. The manner in which the divinity is gendered or represented in racially specific ways and the manner conversely in which human beings are stratified in terms of their proximity to or distance from nature have been used and continue to be used to justify relations of oppression. The mastery of nature goes hand in hand with a mastery of nature within the self and of the mastery and servility of genders, races and classes.

We are delighted to have great **keynote speakers**for this conference:

**Prof. Lisa Landoe Hedrick** is Professor in the Division of Social Sciences at the University of Chicago. She is the author of many journal articles on Process Metaphysics and its intersection with theology and philosophy of religion. She is the author of *Whitehead and the Pittsburgh School: Preempting the Problem of Intentionality* (2022)

**Prof. Timothy Howles** is Assistant Director for Research Programming at the Laudato Si’ Research Institute at the University of Oxford. He has translated some works of Bruno Latour and is the author of *The Political Theology of Bruno Latour: Globalization, Secularization and the Environmental Crisis* (forthcoming 2022).

**Dr. Timothy Mooney** is Associate Professor in the School of Philosophy, University College Dublin. He has published widely on Husserl, Merleau-Ponty and Derrida. He is more recent publications include *Merleau-Ponty’s* *Phenomenology of Perception: On the Body Informed* (forthcoming 2022) and co-editor of *The Phenomenology Reader* (2012).

**Dr. Martin Nitsche** is Professor and Researcher at the Institute of Philosophy of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic. He has written extensively in the area of phenomenology of religion and the philosophy of space. Among his publications are *Die Ortschaft des Seins: Martin Heideggers’ Phänomenologische Topologie*/The Place of Being: Martin Heidegger’s Phenomenological Topology (2013)*; Fenomenologická Interpretace Heideggerových Příspěvků k filosofii*/ Phenomenological interpretation of Heidegger’s Contributions to Philosophy (2010).

**Abstracts/Papers**

If you wish to present a paper, please send either an anonymized paper of no more than 3,000 words or an abstract of no more than 600 words free of any identifying information, and in Word format, to conferencegalway2023@sophere.org **by March 15th 2023** (midnight Irish time). Although we are accepting abstracts, preference will be given to completed papers. In a separate document, send identifying information. You should receive an email acknowledging your submission.

We welcome abstracts from multiple perspectives, including from postgraduate researchers. Areas of interest include the first-person phenomenological perspective and research of religious experience in the following contexts (though not limited to these):

>          Natural Theology and Revelation

>          Religious Nature Poetry

>          Eco-feminism

>          Nature Aesthetics

>          Environmental Aesthetics

>          Naturphilosophie

>          Eastern, Northern, and Southern Perspectives

>          Nature and Grace

>          Philosophy of Nature in Different Religious Traditions

>          Metaphysics of Nature

>          Subjectivity and Nature

>          Phenomenology of Spiritual Practices in Nature

>          Eco-phenomenology and Religious Experience

**Conference format:**

The conference will be held in person unless there is a dramatic change with respect to public health guidance. We may, however, adopt a hybrid model if conditions allow. Papers will be 20 minutes in length with 15 minute questions and answers.

**Conference costs:**

The Conference Fee will be $200 with a €100 concession price for students. This fee includes the cost of the Conference dinner. Other meals will be at the expense of delegates.

**Timeline**:

>10th September 2022: CfA/P opens

>15th March 2023 (midnight Ireland): CfA/P closes

> Mid-June 2023: Abstract submission outcomes communicated

> Early July 2023: Speaker and delegate registration opens

**Selection process:**

>Papers/Abstracts will undergo blind peer-review by members of the SOPHERE board and of the Conference Committee.

> We intend to inform everyone of the outcome of their submission by **15 June 2023**.

If you have any questions about the conference, please email the conference organizers:

> Professor Felix o’Murchadha: felix.omurchadha@universityofgalway.ie

> Dr. Mary Shanahan: mshanahan@stangelas.ie

