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Is it possible for the metaphor of the Book of Nature to become relevant in our days?

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Abstract: A tanulmány egy címben jelzett téma köré szervezett konferencia tanulságait tekinti át a következő kérdések mentén: Miután a kora-újkorban a *liber naturae* hagyománya legalább három jól megkülönböztethető ágra szakadt, miképpen azonosíthatóak be a *Természet könyve*-hagyomány „hosszú tizenkilencedik századhoz” köthető meggyengülésének az eszmetörténeti tényezői? Mit is foglalt magában a *Természet könyvével* való találkozás egykor, és mit jelent a „könyv olvasása” ma? Vajon tapasztalat-e még számunkra a „természeti világnak” az a transzparenciája, ami a látható dolgok mögött egykor azok láthatatlan Szerzőjét, Teremtőjét is a mindennapok szereplőjévé tette? Végző soron pedig az a kérdés, hogy az igeteológia *ressourcement*-ja nyomán, vagyis a logosztani források II. Vatikáni Zsinat ösztönzésére szükséges újraolvasásával, milyen üdvtörténeti távlatok nyílhatnak meg a tágabb hagyományfolyam részét képező *Természet könyve*-hagyomány aktualizálása terén? Nyomatott formában a jelen angol nyelvű szöveg magyar fordítása is elérhető (In: BAGYINSZKI Á. [ed.] [2019]: *A „Természet könyve” mint a „Szentírás könyvének” analógiája*. Konferenciakötet, Sapientia Szerzetesi Hittudományi Főiskola & L'Harmattan, Budapest, pp. 133-140).

The *Religion and Nature* encyclopedia article on *Liber naturae* tradition evaluates the current status of the „book” metaphor:

„While the concept of the Book of Nature is an ancient one, it clearly continues to be revitalized and reinterpreted (particularly with ecological emphasis) in religious thought and practice today.”

(KNEALE GOULD in TAYLOR 2005, p. 211)

Before summarizing the complex question of renewed relevancy reflected by the lectures of our conference, it is worthwhile to outline more precisely what the encounter with the *Book of Nature* once was, and what does „reading the book” mean today? Is the transparency of the „natural world” that once made the invisible Creator of visible things an actor of everyday life still an experience for us?

Our conference was held in the city center of Budapest, though we all recognise that the countryside offers more vivid experience on the subject matter of our theme than secularized cities. We have to make an „excursion” out of our largely artificial, urbanized environment to see the vast horizon that brought the everyday experience of the *Book of Nature* to our predecessors. For example, „light pollution” caused by public lighting of our cities is an obstacle in front of our eyes that deprives us from the beauties of the superlunar (above the Moon) world, once observed and admired by our ancestors. At the same

time, it is also true that our technical civilization provides qualitatively new opportunities to contemplate the „sky”. I wonder whether it is the same „book” adventure or there is a substantial difference between contemplating the cosmic landscape with the naked eye, or through the Hubble Space Telescope’s optics? However, we can ask the same question concerning our terrestrial panorama. Is it the same adventure to contemplate the landscape formed by geological forces and the flora and fauna now as centuries ago, because of the mere fact that thanks to the development of our technical tools we are able to observe them also from the perspective of microphysics and molecular biology? Something has definitely changed. Our horizons of understanding the sublunar and the superlunar worlds had merged already in the 17th century. Since then, instead of a static „cosmos”, we have been thinking of a dynamic „universe” within which our living space is represented by the fragile biosphere and ecosystem of a planet, and our universal history is framed by the „evolutionary natural history”. While phenomena of human society used to form part of the „cosmos”, now it seems that social phenomena should be reread as an independent chapter of the *book*. We are facing old issues in a new way in our contemporary world when represented by psychosomatic illnesses. Our self-understanding has certainly developed a lot following the differentiation of sciences, but has it reached greater depths too?

Analyzing the sources of the tradition of Western Thought concerning the *Book of Nature*, the conference lecturers signaled the initial uncertainties, as well as the early crystallization points associated with Christian Church Fathers. We agreed it would be an exaggeration to say that the authors of the Scripture considered nature as a book, however, the doctrine of the Logos, the broader context of the *book* metaphor, has a strong biblical root. As for the Greek sources, Giuseppe Tanzella-Nitti pointed out that „*the Platonic cosmos, we must not forget, is not a book: to know it, is not to words that one must go, but to ideas and memory*” whereas the stoic doctrine of the Logos has occasionally strong affinity with the later „book” theology. In the western tradition, St. Augustine, St Maximus the Confessor and Scotus Erigena are the most influential authors in the development of the *Book of Nature* tradition.

In the Age of Scholasticism, the idea of *liber naturae* existed as a continuation of the patristic doctrine of the Logos expressing and connecting the cosmic dimension and the christological focus of faith. Tanzella-Nitti remarks about parallel Islamic civilization:

„*an overall look at the content of the Koran shows that the term ‘book’ never refers explicitly to nature, but is always used to indicate the same Koran and its laws*”.

In Christianity the medieval development of the tradition of the *Book of Nature* was due mainly to the work of Hugh of Saint Victor and Saint Bonaventure. Hugh’s hierarchical concept of the triple meaning (*littera-sensus-sententia*) can be translated into our contemporary language as three different models of conceptualizing the truth. The results achieved in the High Middle Ages concerning the „book” metaphor were finally summarized by Raimundus de Sabunde, who also gave new impulses for the further development of the metaphor.

The tradition of *liber naturae* was divided into at least three distinct traditions in the early Modern Age. According to Tanzella-Nitti, the most important development of this era is the emergence and popularity of the idea of a „book written in the language of mathematics” (see, for example, Galileo Galilei). In this interpretation the *Book of Nature* was readable only for a narrow circle of natural scientists („philosophers of nature”) forming a secret elite society consisting of the „priests of science”. This historical change must have been fueled by the experience that „*our senses may deceive us*”, whereas the secrets of nature „*cannot be grasped by the common sense of ordinary people*”. Although this interpretation of the „book” still held the Creator as the ultimate reference point, but it already secularized and lost its moral content. The second tradition can be called the „lay sacralization of nature” since it emphasized the accessibility and readability of the *liber naturae* by everyone. In this respect,

the „book” had key importance in recognising God’s existence and natural morality. Reading it together with the *Book of Scripture* led closer to salvation. The apologetic literature of the era typically referred to the *Book of Nature* in this more vulgar sense. It is to be noted that similar attitudes can still be found in rural cultures even today. The third tradition started as religious criticism that contrasted the *Book of Scripture* with the *Book of Nature*, giving primacy to the latter, and emphasizing the disruption of harmony between the two. This deistic approach presented itself principally as a „modern religion of nature”, while driving many people away from the biblical image of God. When, as a result of a dramatic transformation in the deeper layers of social imaginary, the previously experienced unity of „cosmos” became divided into the physical reality considered „objective”, and the human reality considered „subjective” while the thought of *liber naturae* ceased to be an inherent concept in the history of the ideas (see BAGYINSZKI 2015, pp. 5–14).

It is not easy to identify the historical hallmarks of the weakening *Book of Nature*’s tradition associated with the „long nineteenth century”.¹ A wide range of influential forces can be listed here from the „desanthropocentric” nature of the Copernican turn, to the ever more influential forces shaping our perspective like „computational rationality” and „historical consciousness”. The change in the cultural role of the „book” as well as the ethos-shaping darwinian revolution of the evolutionary principle can also be added to this long list. Nothing less than a complex modernity theory could give an account of the totality of agencies and interferences (see TAYLOR 2007),² however, the rearrangement of the social imaginary defining our basic life experience became evident to everyone for two main reasons:

(1) The holistic ideal of science that previously could be attained by the rare polyhistor, became inaccessible due to the intensive differentiation of specialized sciences.

(2) Human awareness of being „co-creators” in the world is now raised in a different way thanks to the industrial and technological revolutions.

This means that various „hermeneutics” associated with the subjective pole are gaining more and more prominence alongside the „epistemologies” associated with the objective pole. These conceptual and ideological changes have clearly eroded the classical tradition of the *Book of Nature*, as they transformed the public imaginary that served as a basis for the founding metaphors.

Consequently, it wasn’t obvious to what extent the power of the former *liber naturae* thought would imbue the Late Modern culture. While the „book” metaphor used to be perfectly suited to illustrate certain contexts of the Christian doctrine of creation, this shift in the public imaginary connected with the *Book of Nature* would discourage not only contemporary naturalists but also theologians to express their awe by this metaphor while experiencing nature. However, it is also true that experiencing „The Unreasonable Effectiveness of Mathematics”, connects Nobel Prize winning contemporary physicists with an important element of the *Book of Nature* tradition (see WIGNER 1960, pp. 1-14). This is the interference point where pragmatic naturalists turn into sages with childish awe, who could – in that very moment – lead back modern science void of human existential needs to its original philosophical vocation exploring the great questions of human existence.

It is in this context that Giuseppe Tanzella-Nitti is contemplating the possibility of using the renewed *liber naturae* idea. He argues that it is an opportunity not yet exploited for theology to integrate better the recent results of natural sciences, and to clarify its relation with empirical disciplines on the epistemological level: „*the result of natural sciences can be considered a source of positive speculation, so that they can truly help theology to better understand the word of God*” (TANZELLA-NITTI 2004,

¹ A term coined for the period between 1789 (the French Revolution) and 1918 (the end of World War I) of the Western European history that was specially intensive from the point of view of scientific development.

² Summaries on Taylor’s outline on the theory of modernity in Hungarian: GALLAGHER 2014, pp. 731-738; BAGYINSZKI 2010, pp. 45-56.

p. 73). The impact of the updated *liber naturae* experience on the cognitive subject is no less important when assessing the perspectives. The awe felt contemplating the *Book of Nature* is capable of transforming both a scientist or a theologian who ever experienced it:

„To believe that the natural world has the logic of a book, ordered and non-chaotic, written by God and containing a rational message, could influence the ‘spirit’ with which a scientist carries out his or her activity.” (Ibid.)

The history of the *Book of Nature* tradition revised at our conference, its modern-day drama and the efforts made for updating it, concern the dialogue between science and theology in its entirety. In order to evaluate fairly well the questions brought up in this area, it is important to take into account the fact that the idea of the „natural moral law” (*lex naturalis*) is also closely related to the *liberal naturae* thought. Catholic theology cannot declare on this law only in past time, since contemporary teachings of the Magisterium often apply updated principles that have their origin in the *lex naturalis* idea (cf. INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION 2009, 69-75). The tradition of the arguments for the existence of God also has its source in this idea. Ultimately, the *Book of Nature* tradition itself fits into the broader context of the Patristic Doctrine of the Logos – an overall framework formed by general revelation (manifested in the creation) and special revelation (Scripture testimony) – which has been a constitutive element of the Catholic tradition (see BAGYINSZKI in VÁRNAI 2019, pp. 157-192). Therefore, it is still interesting to discuss the question we treated in many aspects in the conference. A question that offers further possibilities for contemplation: following the *ressourcement* of the theology of the Word of God, that is to say rereading the sources of the Doctrine of the Logos inspired by the Second Vatican Council, what perspectives of salvation history can open up thanks to making relevant the *Book of Nature* tradition, which is part of the wider tradition?

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