

Book Review

Jan Peter Grevel, *Mit Gott im Grünen*. Eine Praktische Theologie der Naturerfahrung (Research in Contemporary Religion, Vol. 17), Göttingen (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht) 2015, 357 pp, ISBN 9783525604519, Eur (D) 110.

Reviewed by **Prof. Dr. Ilona Nord**, Universität Würzburg, Institut für Evangelische Theologie, Wittelsbacherplatz 1, 97074 Würzburg, Germany, E-Mail: ilona.nord@uni-wuerzburg.de

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The practical-theological programme “perceiving lived religion” has led a blind spot with it in its reality interpretation for a decade: It categorically ignored the experience of nature as a form of lived religion (cf. 43). The consequence of this omission manifests itself in that a prevalent devoutness of nature has not been further discussed. It is then for Grevel’s project to quintessentially bring practical theology and nature into a reflected relationship. He undertakes this in an initial chapter which reconstructs reflection of experiences of nature within theological controversies. He thereafter delivers four empirical “exploratory walks”. The mass media discourse on nature during the River Elbe floods in August 2002 is a part of them. This phenomenon is examined with the discourse analysis method. Secondly, it is about the view to the sea which is explored by reference to an internet photo portal and is also developed methodically through qualitative image analysis. Thirdly, experience with nature is examined in small garden colonies and fourthly during a hiking tour high up in the summit of the *Hoher Freschen* mountains which the author undertook in August 2008. The two last named phenomena are methodically developed via the ethnological access of *thick description*. One could highlight interpretations and interesting observations by Grevel for all four phenomena which would certainly lead by far here. A quite surprising perspective, which one does not equally expect based on the selection of the above-mentioned phenomena, should be named. It is to be found in the description of the hiking-tour’s phenomenon (203–272). Here, exploration is appointed to a communication about religiously plural ways of marking mountain summits. In addition, the question arises whether the erection of a cross on a mountain top is still to be permitted, or more so whether it is appropriate to religiously sign mountain tops. The depicted case exemplifies that a Buddhist signature in the form of prayer flags is now held out alongside the detectable traditional crosses in Christian signature on Alpine mountain tops. It becomes communicatively apparent that this co-existence does not take place free of conflict. Even though Grevel obviously sees this religiously plural use critically,

he does assign initial hints at the prayer flags signifying not only an exotic exception in the Alps, but rather addressing their impact with regard to a shift in meaning for the Christian symbol of the cross.

Based on what has already been said, it is clear for Grevel that there is no immediate access to what one thinks is to be understood by nature: “Überall dort also, wo wir Natur in ihrer reinen, erhabenen Form verorten, ist dies faktisch längst einer kulturell, ökonomisch und politischen Überformung gewichen, oder präziser gesprochen, das, was an Sehnsuchtsgeesten unserer Kultur über Naturräume eingeschrieben worden ist, existiert längst nicht mehr.” [“Everywhere, i.e. where we locate nature in its pure, sublime form, it has in fact long given way to a cultural, economic and political transformation, or speaking more precisely, what has been inscribed in longing gestures of our culture about natural areas has not long been defunct.”] (17) Nature is not merely to be comprehended as a variation of culture, similarly like a technical one. Were it about a definition of what is meant by the term nature, one moves in the aporias of thought because it is generally inseparably entangled with the cultural thinking and speech patterns of its time and “moreover literally ignore the epistemological important joints which lay between the used orders of apprehension” (20).

Grevel falls in line with the debate in which one does not speak of nature itself, but rather of consciously formulated or unconsciously executed concepts of nature, forms of understanding about what nature can be (cf. 21). A sophisticated result due to many positions of practical theology occurs alongside this seemingly constructivist and communicationally academic based understanding of nature, that distinct and ultimately permeates itself as *cantus firmus* through the examination: nature comes in everyday life, especially vulnerably in view. In addition, it is however to be noted how even nature-spatial experiences also alter very much, and assume an increasing interest in those societal forms of experience (cf. 43).

Eight theses are to be found within the conclusive systemisation for a practical theology of nature experience (cf. 312–317). With the last thesis Grevel formulates more consistently that the religiously connotative, nature-aerial experiences cannot meet the demand for God, but they are to be appreciated a stage for experiences which people made with God (cf. 316).

Grevel's post doctoral thesis is located in the context of the research perspective *perceiving lived religion* and was essentially accompanied by Hans Günter Heimbrock (The Goethe University Frankfurt am Main/Germany, final summer semester 2013). Some argumentations engross a too far-reaching validity; interpretations, especially those which are related to medial communication suffer from a pre-appointed and constricted reality perception which medial communication arguably always views as deficient or at least problematic (cf. e.g 16). The

insulation of the nature phenomenon from the field of social communication and the related presumption of a prelingual content trigger hermeneutic issues above which, as far as I can see, cannot be responded to in this work (cf. e.g 44).

The phenomena and the research issues assigned to them challenge a diversity of method setting. Albeit it is irritating that every “exploratory walk” starts with literature research of the respective phenomenon without even having undergone a discourse analysis amongst them. Precisely the prior knowledge about a topic so communicated should be bracketed in the sense of a phenomenologically trained investigation. This creates the impression that one could have further attained more informative benefits more carefully and closer to the respective examples, and with an even more intensely trained perception orientation. Nevertheless, despite these objections, altogether a book for a de facto still hardly committed range of topics very worthy of reading exists here.