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Natura Sanat: On Ecological Aspects of Healing Miracles in Kalwaria Paclawska, Poland

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KAMILA BARANIECKA-OLSZEWSKA

Nature in Religious Discourses and Imageries in Poland's Kalwaria Pałacowska Sanctuary

Kamila Baraniecka-Olszewska, Ph.D., studied ethnology and Latin American studies. Since 2007 she has worked in the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology of the Polish Academy of Sciences. Her main subject of interest was anthropology of religion and performance studies, and especially forms of religious expression. In 2011 she defended her Ph.D. thesis on Polish Passion plays at Warsaw University. Now she is finishing another project on historical reenactments in Poland. She is an author of over twenty articles dealing with contemporary religiosity and with perceiving and representing history. She also wrote a book on Passion plays, *The Crucified: Contemporary Passion Plays in Poland* (de Gruyter, 2017).

Kalwaria Pałacowska, a Marian sanctuary administered by the Franciscan order, features a venerated miraculous image of Our Lady of Kalwaria, the Attentive Listener.¹ [Photo 1] It lies near the border with Ukraine, approximately twenty-five kilometers south of Przemyśl. [Photo 2] For a number of reasons, the sanctuary's location is of profound importance to the way believers interpret the religious phenomena they come there to observe. Its proximity to the border, in terms of geography but also culture and religion, affects the nature of the entire sanctuary, the services held there, as well as the relations among pilgrims, Franciscans, and the inhabitants of the nearby villages.² In this work,

Photos 1 and 2 credit:
Paweł Baraniecki

1 The research was financed by the National Science Centre, pursuant to the decision number DEC-2013/11/B/HS3/01443.

2 See Iuliia Buyskykh, "Pomiędzy pamięcią a granicą: ukraińska pielgrzymka na Kalwarię Pałacowską," *Etnografia Polska* 60, no. 1-2 (2016): 43-62.

Photo 3 credit:
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however, I focus on a different aspect of Kalwaria Pałacowska's location, namely the natural environment surrounding the sanctuary, since it constitutes yet another important factor that shapes the religious experiences of the faithful³ who come to Kalwaria, just as it directs the practices of the local Franciscan monks, which are designed to deepen the pilgrims' involvement in the local cult.

The sanctuary in Kalwaria Pałacowska is a monastic complex with forty-one eighteenth-century chapels scattered across the two hills on opposing sides of the Wiar River—the Kidron of Kalwaria Pałacowska. [Photo 3] As a calvary, this place of worship is intended to resemble, reflect, and symbolize Jerusalem. *Calvaries*, a kind of Roman Catholic sanctuary, are quite common in Poland, although with the exception of Kalwaria Zebrzydowska near Kraków, they remain mostly only locally popular cult sites. All are built as a set of chapels that are the stations of the Way of

3 Although in the introductory part of the article I do not quote particular respondents and I generalize and synthesize pilgrims' opinions, feelings, and experiences, I do so based on the three years of research I have conducted in Kalwaria Pałacowska during the project. Thus, when I write that pilgrims feel or perceive something in a particular way, I do it based on my fieldwork.

the Cross, but most of them are much more complex architectural compounds and include other sets of chapels, usually pertaining to the history of Virgin's Mary life, since the Marian cult holds a particularly important place in Polish Catholicism.⁴ The first calvaries were built in Poland in the seventeenth century; new though much smaller ones still appear as part of the Polish religious landscape.⁵

The Kalwaria Pałacowska sanctuary consists of wooded hills with brick chapels scattered among them. It is the lay of the land and the richness of the nature around it that influence the pilgrims' experiences and incentivize the local Franciscans to link religion with nature in their various practices. The physical space surrounding the calvary becomes an inspiration, a catalyst, but also a point of reference for the religious rites performed in the sanctuary. Pilgrimage centers are often said to be suffused with an atmosphere of sanctity; both the administrators of such sites and the faithful coming to visit treat them as sacred spaces,⁶ yet the sanctity of the place is performed and maintained through numerous religious practices.⁷ In Kalwaria Pałacowska, the perception of contact with the sacred is amplified by the natural surroundings of the sanctuary; it becomes the material used by both pilgrims and the Franciscans monks to construct its extraordinary character. The sanctuary lies in a sparsely populated region of Poland and occupies a very picturesque spot surrounded by hillocks and forests. This does not mean that no traces of human habitation can be seen in or from Kalwaria Pałacowska, yet the fact that the small village

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- 4 See Cathelijne de Busser and Anna Niedźwiedz, "Mary in Poland: A Polish Master Symbol," in *Moved by Mary: The Power of Pilgrimage in the Modern World*, eds. Anna-Karina Hermkens, Willy Jansen, and Catrien Notermans (Farnham-Burlington: Ashgate, 2009), 87–100.
 - 5 Zbigniew Bania, *Święte miary jerozolimskie* (Warszawa: Neriton, 1997); Elżbieta Bilska, "Przemiany kulturowych i religijnych funkcji kalwarii w Polsce," in *Przestrzeń i sacrum. Geografia kultury religijnej w Polsce i jej przemiany w okresie od XVII do XX w. na przykładzie ośrodków kultu i migracji pielgrzymkowych*, eds. Antoni Jackowski, Aleksandra Witkowska, Zachariasz Jabłoński, Izabela Soljan, and Elżbieta Bilska (Kraków: Instytut Geografii Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 1996), 201–20.
 - 6 John Eade and Michael Sallnow, introduction to *Contesting the Sacred: The Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage*, eds. John Eade and Michael J. Sallnow (London: Routledge, 1991), 1–29; Anna Niedźwiedz, "Competing Sacred Places: Making and Remaking of National Shrines in Contemporary Poland," in *Pilgrimage, Politics and Place-Making in Eastern Europe: Crossing the Borders*, eds. John Eade and Mario Katić (Farnham-Burlington: Ashgate, 2014), 79–99.
 - 7 Kamila Baraniecka-Olszewska, "O wielkim odpuszczeniu w Kalwarii Pałacowskiej ponownie. Refleksja nad antropologią pielgrzymek," *Etnografia Polska* 60, no. 1–2 (2016): 27–42.

Photo 4 credit:
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is not serviced by any bus and offers a beautiful view of the foothills (both on the Polish and the Ukrainian side of the border) enhances the feeling of being cut off from civilization and the rush of the modern world.⁸ [Photo 4]

Significantly, the natural beauty of Kalwaria Paławska is utilized not only by the sanctuary but also by lay institutions; the one drives the other in a circle of reciprocity. A nature reserve has been established in the vicinity of the sanctuary site. It includes didactic trails that educate visitors about the local biodiversity and the history of the place. There are plans to establish a national park in the area (Turnicki Park Narodowy), which would encompass the lands to the south and west of Kalwaria Paławska.⁹ The Franciscan monks from the sanctuary support this initiative, seeing tourism and the promotion of the region as an advantage to them and a direction for the sanctuary's development. [Photo 5]

Residents of the villages surrounding the Kalwaria Paławska sanctuary

8 See also Veronica della Dora, "Setting and Blurring Boundaries: Pilgrims, Tourists, and Landscape in Mount Athos and Meteora," *Annals of Tourism Research* 39, no. 2 (2012): 951-74.

9 Turnicki Park Narodowy, <http://turnickipn.pl/poznaj/> (accessed October 16, 2017).

have a much more utilitarian attitude toward nature and therefore are much more reluctant toward the idea of opening a natural park there. They often take firewood from the forest to heat their houses in winter, and although doing it is not allowed, no one persecutes them. They are, however, afraid that all that is going to change when a national park is established. Moreover, they do not share the pilgrims' enthusiasm for the isolation of Kalwaria Pałacowska from big towns or its location in a calm, natural, depopulated area. They do not appreciate living far from cities, because the isolation makes it necessary to drive a dozen or so kilometers to get to school or work. Thus, religious discourses on nature and the pilgrims' experiences in nature that I describe here, concern residents, pilgrims, and visitors, alike.

Photo 5 credit:
Paweł Baraniecki

Significant for the present study is the reality that local tourism interacts with the religiosity of the sanctuary.¹⁰ Tourists, often visiting at the same time as pilgrims,¹¹ are fascinated with the natural environment that surrounds the sanctuary, and this attitude frames their stay in Kalwaria Pałacowska. When emphasizing the merits of the place, Franciscans refer to its natural beauty and potential for tourism; however, a journey through the region usually involves a visit to the place of worship. These spheres seem inseparable, since despite the unquestionable qualities of the region, the influx of tourists does not account for that many people and visiting is mostly fueled by pilgrims. Interestingly, however, both the tourist and the religious aspect of the place stem from the natural wealth of Kalwaria Pałacowska's surrounding location. In that space, both pilgrims and monks refer to the beauty of God's creation, but also to the need to preserve it and care for it, in that way creating local religious imageries. The

10 Maria Ziaja and Tomasz Wójcik, "Turystyka religijna w rezerwacie 'Kalwaria Pałacowska' w Województwie Podkarpackim," *Prace Komisji Krajoznawstwa Kulturowego* 22 (2013): 167–76.

11 For a recent discussion on separating tourism from pilgrimaging, see Craig T. Palmer, Ryan O. Begley, and Kathryn Coe, "In Defence of Differentiating Pilgrimage from Tourism," *International Journal of Tourism Anthropology* 2 (2012): 71–85.

Photo 6 credit:
Paweł Baraniecki

majority of research done in Kalwaria Paławska was conducted during the largest pilgrimage to the sanctuary, which is linked with the Great Fair of Assumption of the Virgin Mary,¹² to whom the church is dedicated.¹³ [Photo 6] Every August, the sanctuary is visited by thousands of people coming in organized groups, on foot or by car, from several dozen parishes in the vicinity.¹⁴ [Photo 7] For four days, the visitors walk the calvary itself, strolling along the so-called calvary pathways.¹⁵ [Photo 8] During this trek, their visit to the sanctuary also includes the contemplation of the surrounding nature.

FRANCISCAN RELIGIOUS IMAGERY AND NATURE IN THE SANCTUARY

My research hypotheses are based on the belief that people are taught not only how to follow religious practices but also how to experience and interpret events in religious categories and to recognize them as religious.¹⁶ The decision on whether a given event was religious or not is determined by religious imageries—embodied habituses (in Pierre Bourdieu's understanding of the term¹⁷) acquired by learning. They

- 12 The Great Fair is also an indulgence celebration (in Polish: *odpust*), and pious participation in all services may result in absolution of sins.
- 13 The research was conducted in 2015, 2016, and 2017. During these years, I have also studied other religious phenomena, including the festivities honoring St. Francis, yet most of the material pertaining to the relationship with the natural surroundings of Kalwaria Paławska comes from the studies conducted during the Great Fair celebrations.
- 14 Significantly, my research focuses on the pilgrims visiting Kalwaria Paławska for whom the nature surrounding the sanctuary becomes the subject of an extraordinary experience. As mentioned above, local people living in the vicinity have a very different and more utilitarian perception of the place.
- 15 The term pathways refers both to the complex of chapels that forms a kind of a prayer trail for pilgrims walking the road to the calvary and a religious service observed on such trails. There are three kinds of pathways in Kalwaria Paławska: the Pathways of Jesus (28 chapels), the Pathways of Our Lady of Sorrows (16 chapels), and the Pathways of the Funeral and Assumption of Our Lady (14 chapels).
- 16 Thomas J. Csordas, "Embodiment as a Paradigm for Anthropology," *Ethos* 18, no. 1 (1990): 5–47.
- 17 Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 170; Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

are shared, lasting dispositions created by past events and structures that influence practices in the present. What is more, they determine the manner in which these practices are perceived and interpreted in religious terms. According to Thomas Csordas, the creation of imagery—which is dynamic and changeable—falls primarily to the religious elites who determine what belongs to the canon and what does not.¹⁸ However, my research experience has led me to the conclusion, corroborated by the works of other anthropologists,¹⁹ that the interpretations of sanctity imposed “from above” clash with the reactions of the believers, who also have some influence on the ultimate shape of its imagery. Furthermore, several imageries may exist at a given time. As with discourses,²⁰ a single place of worship may generate competing imageries, resulting in the use of different frameworks to interpret phenomena. One example of such imagery, shaped in the sanctuary both by Franciscan monks

Photos 7 and 8 credit:
Paweł Baraniecki

18 Csordas, “Embodiment as a Paradigm for Anthropology,” 12–13.

19 Eade and Sallnow, introduction.

20 Ibid, 15.

and by pilgrims, is deeply connected to the surrounding nature. I have labeled it the “environmental imagery,” since the related practices and interpretations point not only to the beauty of God’s creation but also to the need to protect it. Pilgrims’ experiences in the Kalwaria Paławska sanctuary are shaped in reference to this imagery, in particular.

Pilgrims have long noted the beauty of the landscape surrounding the calvary. The reserve itself was established in 2001, and various initiatives to promote the region because of its scenic qualities have been undertaken for at least a dozen years. The Franciscan monks have decided to utilize this potential only fairly recently. The authorities of the monastery started to systematically and regularly refer to the natural beauty of the place in 2015. My observations indicate that the Catholic Church preaches its lessons using the symbolism of current religious events, jubilee years announced by the Vatican, and special occasions in the life of the Church, turning them into a rhetorical tool, to be used at their discretion. It is an example of updating religious content to include contemporary events.²¹ The sanctuary in Kalwaria Paławska is no exception. The sermons, preachings, and considerations presented during services often refer to significant issues currently faced by the Catholic Church.

In 2015, the phenomena that catalyzed some of the teachings and discussions led by the Franciscans of Kalwaria Paławska included the *Laudato si'* encyclical written by Pope Francis²², also known as the “environmental” encyclical. Its promulgation was significant for the officially imposed religious imagery in Kalwaria Paławska for at least two reasons. First, Franciscans are particularly attuned to the teachings of Pope Francis, since he also chose St. Francis of Assisi as his model and spiritual mentor. Looking for inspiration in St. Francis’ teachings is very apparent in the above-mentioned encyclical.²³ Its prescriptions urging the faithful to care for the Earth and all God’s creations are therefore very close to the Franciscans’ hearts.

21 Baraniecka-Olszewska, “O wielkim odpuszczeniu w Kalwarii Paławskiej ponownie.”

22 Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, 2015, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html (accessed November 20, 2017).

23 Stanisław Jaromi, “Franciszkańskie przesłanie *Laudato si'*,” *Polonia Sacra* 20, no. 3 (2016): 67–80; Xue Jiao Zhang, “How St. Francis Influenced Pope Francis’ *Laudato Si'*,” *Crosscurrents* 66, no. 1 (2016): 42–56.

Second, directing the Church's activity toward ecology is particularly relevant to the situation of Kalwaria Pałacowska, where nature and the landscape influence the image of sanctity and of the miraculousness²⁴ of the place.

The papal encyclical gained a place of prominence in the global discussion on ecology and promoted technical and legal opportunities for implementing Francis's moral ecology, also in the Catholic Church in Poland.²⁵ Echoes of this response to his letter resonate in Kalwaria Pałacowska. Five months after the publication of *Laudato si'*, during the celebrations of the day of their patron (October 4), Franciscans decided to not only honor their spiritual model but also to follow the directives of the encyclical. Thus, the nocturnal service of *Transitus*, held in remembrance of St. Francis's death, was exceptionally ceremonial in tone. [Photo 9] The prior of the monastery referred to the saint's special relationship with nature, presenting him as a model to be followed in this respect. He emphasized that caring for the environment is particularly important in places such as Kalwaria Pałacowska, which are surrounded with almost pristine nature. Referring directly to the *Laudato si'* encyclical, he pointed to the protection of the environment as a moral duty of every Christian.

Photo 9 credit:
Paweł Baraniecki

Explaining the presentation of St. Francis as a model for himself and his brothers, one Franciscan monk suggested to me that the members of the monastic community in Kalwaria Pałacowska ought to be prepared for the same challenges faced by their patron. The Franciscan religious imagery features the story of St. Francis meeting the wolf of Gubbio. The monk recounted that one winter a wolf wandered into the courtyard of the monastery, and one brother who was coming back from shopping simply walked by the animal completely unawares. Only later, when he

24 The miraculous aspect of Roman Catholic sanctuaries is significant in Polish religiosity. People visit cult sites hoping for miracles. They look for information about the miraculous fame of sacred places and believe in their miraculous power.

25 Ryszard Sadowski, "Koncepcja ekospowiedliwości w encyklice *Laudato si'*," *Roczniki Teologiczne* 63, no. 3 (2016): 151–66.

Photo 10 credit:
Paweł Baraniecki

asked whose dog was in the courtyard, did other Franciscans enlighten him that it had been a wolf. As my interlocutor put it, owing to peace and faith, as well as the proper attitude toward the surrounding nature, the monk was not attacked by the animal, but allowed to pass. This incident is incorporated into the religious framework of the Franciscan imagery. They emphasize that respect and taking care of the natural environment is an appropriate Christian behavior.

The story of the wolf is well known in Kalwaria Pałacowska (incidentally, this was not the wolf's only visit in that area), and although nobody had mentioned it as the direct inspiration for the erection of the chapel of St. Francis on the monastery grounds, it may have influenced the choice for the sculpture of the patron. The solemn *Transitus* service was not the only ceremonial event held on October 4, 2015: the other was the consecration of a chapel of St. Francis the Patron Saint of Ecologists. [Photo 10] It houses a figure of the saint alongside a wolf (which bears a striking resemblance to a German shepherd). The founding of this chapel is also an echo of the *Laudato si'* encyclical. The monks of Kalwaria decided that its postulates are in line with showing love toward all God's creations—here understood as the objects of nature surrounding the sanctuary—an idea that stems from the legacy of St. Francis, which they are obligated to propagate. Next to the chapel, there is a board explaining the motivation of the Franciscans to establish this chapel and

emphasizing their dedication to the protection of the natural environment that was so beloved by the patron of their order.

Although since the foundation of the chapel the issue of ecology and the need to care for the environment has become a more frequent element in the Franciscans' sermons and teachings, it must be noted that their message is not entirely consistent. On October 5, 2015, soon after the consecration of the above-mentioned chapel, the sanctuary organized a service to commemorate the conclusion of motorcycle season, and Kalwaria Pałacowska was filled with hundreds of vehicles; the blessing during the Mass on the wellbeing of drivers and the straightness of roads was followed by the deafening roar of hundreds of engines. [Photo 11] However, the majority of the pilgrims, many of whom choose to visit the sanctuary at a different time of the year, are able to enjoy the beauty of the local environment in relative silence and with no interruption.

NATURE AS EXPERIENCED BY PILGRIMS

Photo 11 credit:
Paweł Baraniecki

The believers who come to the sanctuary with their joys and sorrows encounter the religious imagery devised by the Franciscans; however, they themselves also have an influence on the final form of that imagery. They interact with it as well as with the imagery I have labeled “environmental,” since the wildlife surrounding the sanctuary holds a place of profound importance in their interpretation of their religious experiences. As mentioned above, the Church’s official ecological discourse has emerged only in the last few years, whereas experiences that include nature and the landscape of the sanctuary stays with the pilgrims during each visit to the calvary and is present in their memories of each visit. However, the environmental imagery only gained official expression when it was promoted by the Franciscans, who combine the admiration of the local nature as a trace of God’s creation with ecological doctrine. The juxtaposition of these two perspectives resulted in more frequent references to nature and experiences with it in Franciscan teachings.

Pilgrims often started conversations on the subject of nature and also often associated the events occurring in Kalwaria with the surrounding wildlife. This was not the case during my previous research conducted in Kalwaria Pałacowska in 2007.²⁶ Incidentally, the discourse on nature constructed “from the ground up” by the pilgrims is much more complex and elaborate than the one shaped by Franciscans, as it stems from their personal experiences and expectations regarding holy sites.

Believers responding to the imagery imposed by the Franciscans visit the chapel of St. Francis the Patron Saint of Ecologists, but do not treat praying in front of it as an extraordinary event or obligation. This may be due to the relatively short history of the monument (it has only been there for two years); the chapel has not yet been fully integrated as a part of the calvary cult. The chapel of St. Francis by the road to Przemyśl, approximately four kilometers away but built in the same style as the calvary one, is still much more popular. Nevertheless, many pilgrims opine that the founding of the chapel of the Patron Saint of Ecologists was a good idea, since it constituted a reaction to an important contemporary issue that needs to be addressed, and since it is necessary to care for the environment overall so that sites such as Kalwaria Pałacowska can retain their pristine beauty. However, in their descriptions of the sanctuary, the pilgrims were much less likely to refer to the Franciscans' teachings about ecology and nature than to emphasize their own sensations in relation to the local landscape. Research shows that this fact stems from differences in the way the Franciscans and the pilgrims perceive nature. In the official discourse, sanctuary authorities limit its meaning to the environment surrounding the cult site, while pilgrims perceive nature more broadly—as a notion that encompasses landscape, human nature, and God's creation—a space within which they can experience the sacred.

The fact that ruminations on the landscape were included in the discussion about religious experiences demonstrates that the former has the potential to affect the

26 Kamila Baraniecka, “Communitas a intencje pątników. Typy uczestnictwa w pielgrzymce. Wielki Odpust Kalwaryjski Wniebowzięcia Najświętszej Marii Panny w Kalwarii Pałacowskiej,” *Etnografia Polska* 52, no. 1–2 (2008) 137–54, for the English language version see: https://www.academia.edu/33028696/COMMUNITAS_vs._PILGRIMS_INTENTIONS_TYPES_OF_PARTICIPATION_IN_PILGRIMAGE._GREAT_FEAST_OF_ASSUMPTION_OF_VIRGIN_MARY_IN_KALWARIA_PAC%C5%81AWSKA.

latter.²⁷ Significantly, landscape is constituted in the moment of multisensory interaction with it²⁸; nature is not separate from the human being, but linked with it in a chain of current interrelations. This concept “refers both to a framed view of specific sites and the scenic character of whole regions.”²⁹ Some scholars imply that discussions on pilgrimages ought not to focus on landscape only; this suggestion has been a significant source of inspiration for my work. Researchers such as Avril Maddrell and Veronica della Dora indicate that one should instead concentrate on “surfaces,” pointing to all material planes with which the pilgrims have contact. These planes involve more than just the landscape and could include iconostases, for example. Contact with the surface may offer the possibility of access to what is beneath, that is, true sanctity.³⁰ The present article, however, describes a situation in which believers isolate a single aspect of the landscape (and other experienced surfaces), namely nature, and isolate experiencing it from other experiences that are recalled in faithful narrations about pilgrimaging. Incidentally, pilgrims do not treat nature as a surface that hides the true sanctum, but as a manifestation thereof. In the present context, sanctity appears as something natural, as an element of the natural state of a human being. Nature and its experience is not limited to the environment, the landscape, or material surfaces. This concept combines the material surroundings with the spiritual condition of humankind. Thus, nature transcends landscape, entering the realm of spirituality. It therefore offers believers the opportunity to be fully engaged in religious practices, becoming the bridge between human nature and the nature of our surroundings.

Similar to landscape and spirituality, nature ought to be understood as a construct that is performative and performed by believers through practices and interpretations implemented within the framework of the religious imageries. It has a

27 Simon Coleman and John Elsner, eds., *Pilgrimage: Past and Present in the World Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995); della Dora, “Setting and Blurring Boundaries”; Avril Maddrell and Veronica della Dora, “Crossing Surfaces in Search of the Holy: Landscape and Liminality in Contemporary Christian Pilgrimage,” *Environment and Planning A* 45 (2013): 1105–26.

28 Maddrell and della Dora, “Crossing Surfaces in Search of the Holy.”

29 della Dora, “Setting and Blurring Boundaries,” 953.

30 Maddrell and della Dora, “Crossing Surfaces in Search of the Holy”; see also Tim Ingold’s discussion about life above surface in his “Footprints through the Weather-World: Walking, Breathing, Knowing,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 16 (2010): S125–26.

material aspect—the hills, wildlife, air, the earth trodden by pilgrims—as well as an imaginary and discursive aspect, that is, the specific vision of the landscape and the human condition created by the pilgrims and the Franciscan monks. The material side of nature appeared in the foreground of my conversations with many pilgrims, but invariably in connection with their own experiences. Nevertheless, nature influences believers through its material character and shape, while believers influence nature not only directly and physically (within the framework of interrelations), but they also perceive and utilize it in accordance with their beliefs.³¹

The contact with external nature is multisensory in character; pilgrims experience it with all of their senses, breathe it, walk through it, absorb it.³² The feelings it invokes are, however, also influenced by other sensations and other religious imageries apart from the Franciscan ecological doctrine—even though that latter element has a definite impact.³³ A very significant fact in the context of the current discussion is that the material nature surrounding Kalwaria is identified with the environment mentioned in Franciscan teachings on ecology, that is, something that needs to be cared for and protected in order to be able to still feel God's presence in that place.

Believers regard the environment surrounding Kalwaria Paławska as God's creation, on the one hand, due to the proximity of the sanctuary and, on the other, due to the undeniable aesthetic qualities of the site—it is extremely picturesque. Thus, it evokes “a palpable sense of the intermeshing of the visible material and invisible spiritual phenomena.”³⁴ When speaking of it, pilgrims use the term “nature.” Interestingly, contact with sacral architecture only amplifies the feeling of sanctity within landscape.³⁵ They do not identify nature with wilderness devoid of all traces of human habitation—dominant and untamed. On the contrary, they see it as the natural human habitat, friendly and perceived through the lens of the pace of modern life and the oppressive buzz of cities. It is a natural environment that

31 Maddrell and della Dora, “Crossing Surfaces in Search of the Holy,” 1106.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid., 1114; Christine Milligan, “Restoration or Risk? Exploring the Place of the Common Place,” in *Therapeutic Landscapes: Advances and Applications*, ed. Allison M. Williams (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 255–72.

34 Maddrell and della Dora, “Crossing Surfaces in Search of the Holy,” 1106.

35 Ibid., 1117.

Photo 12 credit:
Paweł Baraniecki

is healthy and idyllic, offering spiritual peace. The latter is also provided by sacred space. It is because, as della Dora writes, “wilderness and the holy share two main similarities. Firstly they both evoke separation from the ordinary against which they are defined. Secondly, taken literally, they both cause ‘bewilderment’, wonder, displacement.”³⁶ However, the scholar does note that “wilderness is psychological as much as it is geographical,”³⁷ and moreover, “in the western geographical imagination wilderness is no longer an unbound terra incognita, but, rather, a precarious archipelago to be safeguarded from the evils of modernity.”³⁸ For this very reason, the landscape of Kalwaria Pałacowska, crisscrossed as it is with roads and houses, remains natural enough to direct the pilgrims’ experiences. [Photo 12]

The opportunity to notice sanctity and traces of divinity in Kalwaria Pałacowska is partially the result of the sanctuary’s association with pure nature.³⁹ The site is

36 della Dora, “Setting and Blurring Boundaries,” 951.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid., 952.

39 See Maddrell and della Dora, “Crossing Surfaces in Search of the Holy,” 1108. Relations with nature are crucial also in non-Christian kinds of spirituality, see Anna Fedele, *Looking for Mary Magdalene: Alternative Pilgrimage and Ritual Creativity at Catholic Shrines in France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 83, 103–4. Though in these cases, the relation might be mediated by belief and contact with spirits of nature, while in Catholicism, it is treated as a manifestation of God’s presence.

regarded as somewhat wild, due to its remote location and relative inaccessibility (to reach the sanctuary, one needs to either ford a river or drive up a very narrow, winding road). This impression is amplified by the presence of rare wild animals of the forest. A herd of deer, an eagle, or even a bear is not a rare sight in the fields surrounding the site (except during Great Fair celebrations). Smaller birds of prey, roe deer, and boars are considered common. All these aspects of the natural environment make the pilgrims visiting Kalwaria Paławska feel closer to God while there.⁴⁰ It is not symbolic, but physical closeness, since the vicinity of the sanctuary is perceived as unchanged, primal, God's creation.

NATURE AS A "SENSATIONAL FORM"

This article is based on the assumption that the sensual aspect of religious practices constitutes a crucial form of relations with the sacred.⁴¹ For this reason many scholars focus on the material indicators of sanctity, which are the subject of direct, sensory relations.⁴² Taking inspiration from Brigit Meyer's studies, I shift the weight of the analysis from the sensual contact with the sacred to the forms within religious reality that believers encounter and their impact on the shape of the cult and the experiences of the pilgrims.⁴³

Although frequently depreciated as no more than carriers of meaning—for example, forms, gestures, or rites—material objects play a key role in the analysis of religiosity.⁴⁴ It is the interpretation of forms that is governed by religious elites that

40 Avril Maddrell, "Moving and Being Moved: More-Than-Walking and Talking on Pilgrimage Walks in the Manx Landscape," *Culture and Religion* 14 (2013): 63–77.

41 Webb Keane, *Christian Moderns: Freedom and Fetish in the Mission Encounter* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007); Brigit Meyer, *Religious Sensations: Why Media, Aesthetics and Power Matter in the Study of Contemporary Religion*, 2006. https://www.academia.edu/5627264/Religious_Sensations._Why_Media_Aesthetics_and_Power_Matter_in_the_Contemporary_Study_of_religion_inaugural_lecture_2006_ (accessed May 14, 2018); David Morgan, *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997); Niedźwiedź, *Religia przeżywana. Katolicyzm i jego konteksty we współczesnej Ghanie* (Kraków: Libron, 2015).

42 Meyer, *Religious Sensations*; Morgan, *Visual Piety*.

43 Meyer, "Mediation and Immediacy: Sensational Forms, Semiotic Ideologies and the Question of the Medium," *Social Anthropology* 19, no. 1 (2011): 30.

44 Meyer, "Aesthetics of Persuasion: Global Christianity and Pentecostalism's Sensational Forms," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 109, no. 4 (2010): 749–51.

directly influence the spiritual experiences of the faithful. In religious practice, the sensual relation with the sacred is often indirect and effected through various media—the “sensational forms.” Following Meyer, I understand “forms” as “relatively fixed, authorized modes of invoking, and organizing access to the transcendental, thereby creating and sustaining links between religious practitioners in the context of particular religious organizations”⁴⁵ or “particular religious regimes.”⁴⁶ They also are “distinctive and induce repeatable patterns of feelings and action.”⁴⁷ “Sensational forms” are the “media that mediate, and thus produce, the transcendental and make it sense-able.”⁴⁸ Material objects (e.g., an icon, a holy book) may sometimes take another form as well—that of collective rituals or prayers.⁴⁹ A medium understood in such a way not only objectifies the influence of divine power, it also creates its appearance.⁵⁰ This is perfectly apparent in the interpretation of the surroundings of Kalwaria Paławska, in which the pilgrims see the appearance of God.⁵¹

There are other phenomena in Kalwaria Paławska that seem more important as sensational forms, such as the venerated image of Our Lady drawing pilgrims from the entire region, the chapels scattered among the hills, or the monastery itself. The relationships believers form with these objects are, however, influenced by nature, which is in itself regarded as a manifestation of sanctity. For this reason, I have decided to analyze the environment around Kalwaria Paławska as a separate sensational form. Believers form distinctive relations with nature, and even though they are related to the experiences stemming from contact with other sensational forms, it is nature in itself that allows them to feel the sacred. It is not a barrier, but a way to arrive at a relation with God.⁵² Unlike some surfaces described by Maddrell and della Dora,⁵³ when in contact with the sanctum, the surroundings of Kalwaria Paławska does not obstruct anything, but in fact becomes a means for feeling the

45 Meyer, *Religious Sensations*, 9.

46 Meyer, “Mediation and Immediacy,” 29.

47 Meyer, “Aesthetics of Persuasion,” 751.

48 Meyer, *Religious Sensations*, 14.

49 Ibid., 9.

50 Ibid., 14–15.

51 See Maddrell and della Dora, “Crossing Surfaces in Search of the Holy,” 1107.

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid., 1113.

presence of God, even though it is “just” a medium. Meyer emphasizes that believers do not perceive the experience of interacting with sensational forms as oblique; on the contrary, they are convinced by the directness of the contact with God.⁵⁴ Thus, people who enter nature often perceive and interpret it in terms of sanctity; contact with it results in a specific kind of spiritual elation.⁵⁵ However, the landscape surrounding the sanctuary in Kalwaria Paławska is experienced by pilgrims through the lens of their religion. Their approach to and interactions with nature is therefore different than in the case of tourists who are not religiously involved.⁵⁶

SENSATIONS

Formulating the definition of sensational forms, Meyer notes that the term encompasses not only the sensual aspect of religious experiences but also the unusual feelings—sensations—associated with being in contact with them.⁵⁷ This facet is particularly significant for interpreting experiences in nature, since pilgrims speak primarily of their own impressions and feelings. The senses are involved, yet it is these sensations that are the key to recognizing sanctity in the natural environment around Kalwaria Paławska.

The essential impression related to nature recounted by the pilgrims who visit Kalwaria Paławska is a rush of energy. All my interlocutors, without exception, informed me that the place is special for them because there they can “charge their batteries” for the entire year. I asked what the source of the energy was—prayer, or the fact they managed to complete a difficult pilgrimage on foot? But, their answer usually pointed to the place. “This place makes me full of energy.” I enquired further, asking about the unique features of the place: was it the monastery, the miraculous image, the atmosphere? In this case, they usually replied, “It is the beauty, the beauty of this place.” Pushing them further to identify what they were

54 Meyer, *Religious Sensations*.

55 Kerry Mitchell, *Spirituality and the State: Managing Nature and Experience in America's Natural Parks* (New York: New York University Press, 2016).

56 See Maddrell and della Dora, *Crossing Surfaces in Search of the Holy*, 1112–13. By religious involvement, I mean here the act of seeking any kind of spirituality, not necessarily Catholic, since as Anna Fedele shows non-Christians also profit spiritually from visiting Catholic sacred places; see Fedele, *Looking for Mary Magdalene*.

57 Meyer, *Religious Sensations*.

referring to as “beauty” often resulted in irritation and exclamations such as: “Just look around! It’s beautiful here!” Other conversations about “the place” revealed that the natural beauty of the town’s surroundings makes Kalwaria Pałacowska a unique sanctuary. The pilgrims, usually well informed when it came to other places of worship in Poland and in Europe, unanimously named Kalwaria Pałacowska as the most picturesquely located sanctuary, or at least one of the few in that category. Significantly, they made a direct connection between the beauty of the local landscape and the rush of energy they experienced. Many recalled the moment in their pilgrimage when, walking along an asphalt road, sometimes in rather unpleasant surroundings, they see the calvary hill and the church towers upon it. The charm of this view gives them a surge of energy; they want to reach the summit as soon as possible. This state of high-energy elation persists until the pilgrimage is over. This reaction demonstrates the strong connection between nature (here understood as the environment) and sanctity. For believers, the church towers become a symbol of the beauty of nature; they fit into the scenery, and everything combines into a unique experience of the environment. Contact with sacral landscape may thus offer a memorable feeling of renewal.⁵⁸ Some of the pilgrims to whom I spoke admitted that they only experience this in Kalwaria Pałacowska; other pilgrimage destinations, although they make an impression, do not evoke such a significant reaction, a boost in their physical state.

The energy rush felt by many believers may be considered a manifestation of the sanctity of the place. Nature itself is not the source—this is not a case of a New-Age-type or neopagan spirituality⁵⁹—but rather the belief that God can also work through one’s environment and surroundings.⁶⁰ Different from believers of non-Christian religions in cases described by Anna Fedele, Catholics do not take energy from the place where rituals are performed, and the energy itself is not a goal of their travel.⁶¹ The pilgrims themselves connect the rush of energy in Kalwaria Pałacowska with the miraculous nature of the site, saying that this is a place where

58 Maddrell, “Moving and Being Moved.”

59 Anna E. Kubiak, *Jednak New Age* (Warszawa: Jacek Santorski & Co., 2005); Fedele, *Looking for Mary Magdalene*.

60 Maddrell, “Moving and Being Moved.”

61 See Fedele, *Looking for Mary Magdalene*.

people are healed, miracles happen, and a quantum of the healing energy reaches all who come there. Many of my interlocutors, especially persons of advanced age, made a direct connection between that energy and their restoration of health. I do not mean miraculous recoveries, but a significant improvement in their physical and spiritual state.⁶² Walking the calvary pathways involves three days of intense peregrination. The longest of them takes approximately eight hours to complete. For elder pilgrims, this is no small feat, yet many of them decide to take part in the pathway services since, as they claim, when they arrive in Kalwaria Paławska, their current ailments ease or subside altogether, and the energy gained at the site allows them to do things for which they would not have had the strength in everyday life. It also makes it possible for them to establish a deep connection with nature, because walking—in this case, a specific form of exercise as well as a religious practice—amplifies the intensity of experiencing landscape.⁶³ Walking influences their perception of their natural surroundings. “The ground is perceived kinaesthetically, in movement. If we say of the ground of a hill that it ‘rises up,’ this is not because itself is on the move but because we feel its contours in our own bodily exercise.”⁶⁴ Not only the ground, but also the surrounding landscape in Kalwaria Paławska is experienced by and from a walking body, and so is the energy of the place, which is known through and measured by walking. Walking to and in the sanctuary enables a body to feel this energy, and its strength can be counted in steps made in the hilly countryside, just as described in the experiences of elder pilgrims. Moreover, pilgrims can immerse themselves in the act of walking, and so distance themselves from the trivialities of everyday life.⁶⁵ Younger pilgrims, including teenagers, associate the rush of energy they experience with a special kind of joy, which they feel from the moment they spot the towers of the church rising above the wooded hills. Despite fatigue and weariness, they feel an overwhelming energy that drives them to keep walking and later to walk through the calvary. What is important is that the energy felt by the pilgrims is unanimously presented as a positive one, a good one.

62 Maddrell, “Moving and Being Moved.”

63 Maddrell and della Dora, “Crossing Surfaces in Search of the Holy,” 1116; Maddrell, “Moving and Being Moved,” 64–65.

64 Ingold, “Footprints through the Weather-World,” 125.

65 della Dora, “Setting and Blurring Boundaries,” 966.

None of my respondents mentioned any flow of negative energy.⁶⁶

The pilgrims often say that when they breathe “the air of calvary,” smell the forest, and look at the hills surrounding the sanctuary, they feel that their bodies are filled with energy. One pilgrim told me that the meadows below the calvary hill exude an “angelic perfume,” which for many years he has associated with this very location; in his view, it is this smell that triggers the experience of the sacred nature of the place. Then he added, smiling, that heaven must smell like that, of meadow flowers. Hence, the act of breathing is especially important in considering the natural surroundings of this place of worship; this seems to be the key experience in the pilgrims’ relationship with nature. They describe the air on the calvary hill as “pure,” “natural,” or “good.” Sometimes they say, as a joke, that here, one inhales sanctity.

This is because breath is associated with spirituality. Many religious practices, for instance, meditation, rely on breathing techniques; in these circumstances, spiritual experience and spiritual development are based on the sensations experienced while breathing.⁶⁷ In Catholicism, less attention is focused on the awareness of breathing; even so, as I state at the beginning of my analysis, this process organizes some religious experiences because it is extremely involved; it constitutes a way of experiencing the environment. Breathing is associated with living and feeling; at the same time, it makes a person aware of their corporeal existence within the natural world. It may, therefore, direct attention to, evoke, or intensify a sensual experience.⁶⁸ As Steve Edwards put it, to experience “the meaning of breathing is to experience more meaning in life itself in all its aspects and phases.”⁶⁹ Breathing accompanies all human activity and constitutes its inseparable element. Usually it remains in the background, but there are moments when it comes to the fore and turns into the dominant means of interacting with the environment.

Breathing the air of the calvary, especially the deep and aware breathing, makes the

66 For analysis of examples of negative energy in Catholic sacred places, see Fedele, *Looking for Mary Magdalene*.

67 Steve Edwards, “Experiencing the Meaning of Breathing,” *Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology* 6, no. 1 (2006): 1–13.

68 *Ibid.*, 2–3.

69 *Ibid.*, 11.

pilgrims feel an influx of energy. They believe that in the sanctuary they actually inhale energy. A female pilgrim at the Great Fair celebrations told me that with every breath she took in Kalwaria Paławska she had more energy and that she felt it spreading inside her body. More than one person admitted how much they liked the moment when, walking from their home parish, they arrive in front of the sanctuary church and, during the so-called “greeting of the pilgrims” (which involves one of the Franciscan fathers blessing the newly arrived crowds), they consciously take their first breath of the pure local air; they said they anxiously waited for this moment. One gentleman told me that in no other place was this first breath upon arriving equally affecting; although he had tried to achieve the same experience in other pilgrimage centers, only in Kalwaria Paławska was the air so extraordinary. A female pilgrim summed up this part of our interview by saying that in the landscape surrounding the sanctuary one could “breathe truly.”

The experience of the purity of the air is most eloquently described by those pilgrims who came to Kalwaria Paławska in order to plead for the Virgin Mary's help to give up smoking. Some pilgrims told me that during the Great Fair celebrations they found it easier not to smoke, because they so enjoyed the smell of the local air and did not want to ruin this experience by lighting a cigarette. However, some of them admitted that this was not their first attempt at quitting the habit and that previously they had also started with a pilgrimage to the sanctuary; but when they found themselves away from it, they did not feel its direct influence, and their motivation dwindled. Still, they pointed to the first deep breath taken in Kalwaria Paławska—without feeling the need to light up—as a particularly pleasurable experience. In one case, I heard that this one breath caused a lady to quit smoking outright; it changed her approach to her struggle with the habit, and from the moment she felt the pure air of Kalwaria Paławska inside her, she became “a free human being” (i.e., she was freed from the need to smoke).

Furthermore, the pilgrims described the air in the vicinity of the sanctuary as healthy. They were of the opinion that God helped them to fight their ailments also by means of the natural environment. There, they felt better, their complaints ceased, and miracles were possible. In speaking about the miraculous recoveries

they had witnessed or of which they had heard, achieved through the intercession of the Our Lady of Calvary, the pilgrims stressed that a person could find in Kalwaria Pałacowska the strength to fight the disease precisely because of the energy flowing from the surrounding nature into their bodies. Thus, they described nature as an element that completed the miracle-working influence of God. This energy enables them to engage more, to participate more fully, in their pilgrimage, to attend all celebrations, to offer more prayers to God, and these practices are perceived by the faithful as a necessary part of asking for a miracle. Furthermore, as one of pilgrimage participants told me, this energy is for her a tangible sign of God's presence and gives her patience to struggle with her disease. She called it "an auxiliary power." Thus, energy of the place is not perceived as miraculous, but as a certain element of the setting in which healing miracles are likely to occur.

As my research shows, miracles—for example, a recovery from illness, a cure from infertility, a letting go of a habit (especially when achieved by a particularly persistent offender)—in the perception of pilgrims do not arise directly from the influence that the landscape has on the believers. They are associated rather with zealous prayer and God's grace. But the feeling of comfort within the environment and an encompassing sensory relationship with it that generates a positive mood both complement the process of striving for a miracle. Maddrell writes about therapeutic landscapes, which help to achieve physical cures.⁷⁰ Nature is soothing. Many pilgrims come to the calvary burdened with troubles and mired in sadness. The local landscape allows them to forget their plight for a while. The pilgrims say that while praying at the calvary, they feel gladdened by the beauty of the landscape, but they also feel stimulated, because the doubled energy with which they participate in the events allows them to offer the Virgin Mary a larger sacrifice: to unfailingly attend pathway services, to visit additional chapels, to attend the open-air Masses in pouring rain or in sweltering heat (for some reason the weather during the August Great Fair is very rarely pleasant), and to take part in night vigils. This is because "undertaking a physical process facilitates [the pilgrims'] spiritual goal."⁷¹

70 Maddrell, "Moving and Being Moved," 64.

71 Maddrell and della Dora, "Crossing Surfaces in Search of the Holy," 1107.

SUMMARY

Two aspects of nature appear in the religious imageries associated with Kalwaria Paławska: the environmental one, which pertains mostly to the external nature and which is present in the teachings of the Franciscan brothers, and the vision of nature as encompassing the material and spiritual spheres, which arises from the experiences of the pilgrims. These two concepts are interlinked on the level of discourse: physical natural environment must be treasured and protected also because only then will the spiritual experiences achieved in the environment of the sanctuary remain equally intense. The assertion that nature must be protected because it is an element of the divine creation appears both in the teachings of the Franciscans and in the statements of the pilgrims. Yet the experiences of the pilgrims, their sensory involvement in the space, refer more to the second method of conceptualizing nature. The pilgrims' feelings transcend nature as such; they refer to nature as the sphere that connects human spirituality with the environment and as the space where the pilgrims, the sanctum, and the natural world share a rapport. Owing to this, a sensory experience of materiality that is external to a pilgrim brings about an inner transformation (the healing or soothing of the spirit) as well as a physical transformation (improvement in the condition of the body). When nature is understood in this way, protecting it cannot be limited to ecology alone; conversely, it involves retaining a place for the human being, and for sanctity, within natural beauty. In this manner, nature acquires a healing, therapeutic power.

This is because the beauty of nature alone is important but not sufficient to provide a foundation for religious experiences. The ways of experiencing the space of the Kalwaria Paławska sanctuary indicate that both wooded hills full of wild animals and sacred buildings scattered among them are perceived by the pilgrims as part of the natural environment. This is also a space in which to pray is a natural thing; where the divine nature and the human nature merge with the naturalness of the environment, jointly creating a unique space for religious experiences.

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