

# Ecology and Orthodoxy

In our time it is evident that what has been called "ecological crisis" is one of the most important problems that are facing mankind. Unlike other problems the ecological crisis is a phenomenon that does not affect just a few countries or a certain social class. It is visible all over the world, it is a global problem which affects every one of us. It has to do not simply with the wellbeing but with the very being of nature, of the human community, of creation itself.

Man, incited by his greed, managed to destroy the physical harmony, that dominated nature. By increasing his ever-unsatisfiable demands on nature to the extreme, he destroyed the fragile balance which existed, until recently, between the several organic parts of nature. He used up all energy resources, he polluted the air, the seas, his environment and made life unbearable.

As the environmental problem was approaching the point of no return for the western, technologically and industrially advanced, countries the situation was getting worse all over the world, only then was it understood under the pressure that was imposed by a few sensitive environmentalists that something should be done. So action was left in the hands of experts: physicians, special scientists, technocrats and politicians. Ironically the same people that were mostly to be blamed for the ecological crisis, were activated so that this problem could come to an end. Consequently, ecology, environmental action and measures for the protection of nature became an integral part of the political

propaganda in every country. Each party in Greece and I believe in every country claims to have a solution to our environmental problems. So the common citizens, even though they can see the consequences of the ecological crisis in their immediate environment and they can realise the imminent danger of a complete disaster, do nothing except to leave other people handling the problem.

But what can be done? How is theology, and especially orthodoxy, connected to ecology? Are they two completely different notions and if not, how is orthodoxy in any way linked with ecology?

Many environmentalists believe that orthodoxy and theology in general - has nothing to do with ecology. And there are not a few Orthodox who believe that they should leave aside their orthodox identity before entering into an ecological movement because orthodoxy does not approach ecology.

## Nature in Orthodox Theology

Trying to prove that orthodoxy not only approaches but encloses within itself ecology I shall first of all try to present to you what I believe to be the orthodox point of view of nature. First of all, we must understand that God created nature and within her He placed man, not because He was obliged to do so but due to His love. Nature didn't have to exist. But God created her because as we orthodox believe - only in a community with other different beings could man live. Nature and humanity were made to be interdependent, linked closely to each other and giving mutual aid when needed. Man and nature do not stand in opposition to each other but in positive

relation. It is important at this point to underline something that might seem strange to the readers of this text. We, the orthodox refer to nature, by using "her" and "she" instead of using "it". By doing so, we point out the necessity to understand that nature is not an object, a thing with no life, but a living part of His creation gifted with the ability to give life (Mother Nature).

Orthodoxy recognises the existence and the Holy Grace of God in every small part of nature. Western theology divides the appearance, the "apocalypse" of God in two; the supernatural and the natural. Supernatural when the Lord himself appears, in different ways, to man and natural when we can see the grace of God through the beauty of nature. Orthodoxy denies this division and believes that God does not simply use the creation as a means of appearing to man but also coexists in nature. Man should respect nature and treat her as a bearer of life.

But instead, humanity pays no respect to nature. Man is the only creature of this world who instead of adjusting to his natural environment each time it changes, as other creatures do, manages to adjust the environment to his own needs and desires. This speciality of mankind was the cornerstone on which man's civilisation was based. This is an essential, a basic power that humanity possesses and if separated it would lead to the end of the human race.

But, finally, man was led to a confrontation with nature, by not being able to handle this ability with

caution. Man and only man, in creating his own world, can often go against the inherent rationality of nature, of the world given to him; he can even destroy the world given. Western theology is responsible up to a certain point for this confrontation. Western theology gave man the feeling of superiority towards nature. So, man conceived himself to be not a part of nature but her ruler. He faced her as a rival and tried to submit her to his demands. It is no longer a matter of selfdefence towards environmental dangers, a matter of survival. Civilisation became a goal in itself with one aim only: selfpreservation. Man destroyed everything to fulfil his egoism. An egoism that pointed out to him that he was superior to nature and that nature exists so that we could seize what we want from her.

Western theology also cultivated the belief that flesh and the material world in general is not only holy but instead it possesses evil in itself: for example, in the Kingdom of God in St Augustine's vision there is no room for the material world; it consists of the survival of spiritual beings, of the eternal souls.

Not only is the spirit superior to the body, but most important, we must reject the material world, we must throw away our bodies because they are weak and evil. So Christians lost their respect for everything that was material, resulting in the rejection, exploitation and finally to the destruction of nature.

As we can see, man took no care of his environment, he failed in having a positive relation with nature. But how can orthodoxy reach a solution? What can we do to avoid the deadend that we will soon reach?

There are not a few who believe that we should aim at the change of man's moral values, of man's habits and customs, according to a certain etiquette. And as a result human beings will get used to a more "ecological" behaviour. But if we try to solve the ecological problems by introducing new ethical values or rearranging the scale of the traditional ones, I fear we shall not go very far in reaching a desirable solution. Because the ecological problem, although being a problem of science and up to a certain degree of ethics of state and European Commission legislation, of education and habits, it is also a theological problem.

#### **Loving Nature**

Orthodoxy believes that the only way

to reach a solution is placing nature in the liturgical procedure. Man should be released from his egoism, he must overcome the bounds of his egoism that led humanity to believe in man's superiority.

Love and only love is the most important element of Christian faith. And love goes together with the breaking of one's own selfish will. The individuals with the desire to dominate the external world and use it for their own satisfaction should learn not to make the individual the centre of creation. This idea is very useful in order, to teach modern man how to solve the ecological problem. But, it should not be taken as part of an ethical education then it would lead nowhere. This spirit can be meaningful if, combined with the liturgical experience it creates an ethos rather than prescribed rules of behaviour, and in this sense it can be useful to theology which in turn can be helpful in dealing with the ecological crisis.

I have used the word "liturgical" twice, but where in liturgy can we see the involvement of nature?

For the orthodox the rule of nature is very important in the sacraments and especially in the Eucharist. The Eucharist is not a memorial service of God's sacrifice. Orthodoxy recognises two notions in this sacrament: firstly the notion of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, so that we can "eat" His flesh and "drink" His blood in order to be united with Him. Secondly the notion of blessing over the material world, of nature and a reference of creation with gratitude and dedication to the Creator to God. The priest says during the Eucharist: "Thine own of thine own we offer unto thee". We take the bread and the wine and we give them, we refer them to the Lord. When we take them back they are Holy because they possess the grace of God. Man, also, must act as a priest: as a priest of nature. God, when he created the material world did not give to nature the ability of deification. Man was given this ability by being created according to the image of God. Man has access to eternal life he has a place in the Kingdom to come. But nature herself is destined to die. Only after the invention of man can nature reach deification. So we must as the priest in the Eucharist refer nature to God, and make her eternal. Only then we will have a positive relation to nature. When Jesus Christ appeared to us He entered into a human body. His flesh was no longer mortal, but according to the

gospel, it was shining all over. Also in Gerontikon - a collection of stories about monks and their sayings we can find stories of monks who lived peacefully with wild animals. Even today on Mount Athos we can encounter monks who never kill snakes but who coexist in peace with them. Perhaps some of you may think that this is just mythological elements of our tradition. Personally I believe in them but even if they are simply myths they show very well man's desire for a better relation with nature.

We must love nature. We must understand that our selfishness will lead to disaster and only by rejecting our demanding ego will we be able to solve the ecological problem. All of this is a belief and a practice, which can not be imposed as a rule on anyone. It may easily be mistaken for sheer ritualism. To avoid the destruction of the environment nevertheless I believe that this is an ethos that we need badly in our time. Not an ethic but an ethos, not a programme but an attitude, not a prescribed rule of behaviour but a mentality, not a legislation but a culture.

#### **Christians and Nature**

The Christian regards the world as sacred because it stands in close relationship with God. He respects nature without worshipping her, of course. The human being is the only possible link between God and creation. There are two ways of action: The first is to disregard nature, based on our superiority. An action which will condemn nature to the state of a "thing", the meaning and purpose of which are exhausted with the satisfaction of the humans. The second is to bring nature to communion with God and as a result of this sanctify her.

When speaking of "priesthood", naming man "Priest of Creation", we talk about a broader existential attitude encompassing all human activities that involve a conscious manifestation of our love towards nature. This seems to be the only way to face the ecological problem. It is clear that the model of human exploitation of the material world and our domination over nature in the modern world of today will no longer do for the survival of God's creation.

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