

Ecology and Orthodoxy

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Defining the position of the Church on environmental issues is among the nascent challenges that the modern age presents to the Orthodox Tradition. This subject is not without controversy, however, and it begs to be liberated from the realm of politics and media hype and examined in light of Orthodox theology.

This issue is all the more poignant because the very problem of the environmental crisis is a relatively new one, brought to its acute point only in the post-Industrial society, and therefore is subject to modern theological thought. The imperative to examine this matter in light of the Orthodox Tradition “with the mind of the Fathers” within the context of contemporary culture reminds us that the Tradition is dynamic, evolving, called to respond to the world challenges as they arise, and not a dead artifact of the first few hundred years of Christian history.

In general, what does it mean for an Orthodox Christian to be “environmentally responsible”? In the Book of Genesis we are told that “God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it.” (Gen. 2:15). It also says that God commanded Adam, “Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” (Gen. 1:28).

Verses 1:26 and 28 are a subject of passionate debate among Christians who read those verses in two radically different ways. The debate tends to concentrate on the word “dominion” and whether this word gives human beings leave to deal with the material Creation as we please or whether it implies responsible stewardship. However, this interpretation narrows the matter down to what is known in the contemporary language as environmental responsibility, and thereby leaves out of the equation the essential issue of the Fall: the corruption of human relationship with God and the resultant corruption of all creation which is further described in Genesis 6.

It may be useful to remember that the concept of “dominion” both in 1:26 and 1:28 follows the most mysterious statement “God created man in his own image”. In Slavonic, the word for “dominion” is “lordship”, of the same root as “Lord”. “Lordship” over all Creation was an attribute of Man *before* the Fall, the exercise of the “likeness of God”. The naming of the beasts that occurs in Gen. 2:19-20 and the “subduing” of the earth are the birthrights of the children of God as they were meant to be. Theology explains that the mission of Man was to bring all creation into unity with its Creator. “Man, on the other hand, because of his material hypostasis, partakes of the material world/Creation; he was from the very beginning pre-ordained by God as the par excellence instrument by which this union of the created and the Uncreated was to be realized, and the subsequent survival of the created.”¹ The meaning of human lordship is beautifully explained in C. S.

Lewis' *Perelandra*, a fictional account of the world in which humans overcome the temptation and do not suffer the Fall.

It is this primary lordship that was the casualty of the Fall, when the relationship between humanity and the rest of the created world became one of strife. The image of God became corrupted by disobedience and sin, and man doomed himself to constant battle for survival and desperate struggle with the forces of nature: "Cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee." (Gen. 3:17-18). Only those suffering from supreme delusion may think that the present relationship of humanity and the environment can be characterized as our "dominion".

We should therefore consider the account of creation and the fall in the way we look at such modern phenomena as, for instance, climate change. Although there is always room for scientific debate, there can be no question from the theological perspective that climate change is anthropogenic in origin. Whether the impact of human activity on climate processes is qualitative is irrelevant since it is the impact of human sin that makes all nature corrupt. As St. Paul says in his Letter to the Romans, "all of Creation also sighs and suffers" (Rom. 8:22).

Moreover, because of the unique relationship of Man to the rest of Creation, relationship which is pre-ordained and is therefore objective, the impact of human activity on the material world is the only one that is destructive. "Man has indeed reached the point of being a veritable threat to Creation. That expression of "go forth and conquer the earth..." - the exercising of his freedom - has led him to use Nature thoughtlessly, to use it as he wishes."² It is clear therefore that from the theological perspective human relationship with our environment is part of our spiritual battle – we can *choose* to exercise our freedom to the detriment of Creation or we can *choose* to care for Creation even to the point of limiting or sacrificing our needs.

It can be concluded that caring for Creation is in no way separate from the process of theosis. If human destiny is to transcend our fallen state and to achieve unity with God, it must include the attaining of the state of servitude to Creation which is part of the true lordship. For we know through the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ that the real power is in weakness, that the process of ascension is kenotic, and that, borrowing from Met. Zizioulas explanation of Christian hierarchy, it is an inverted pyramid, with the Lord of all being simultaneously the Head of the Church and the servant of all.

Our culture has become the culture of wasteful consumption of resources whereupon we only take and move on, without giving back – this is not a relationship of love, nor of lordship. For lordship, if it is to be Christ-like, is that of a "good shepherd", not of a thief and plunderer. Only if this relationship changes can we begin to exercise our Eucharistic unity with the world. We must not, however, fall into extremes of an essentially pagan mindset of "tree-hugging" – it is not for Man to fully subdue himself to nature, for that would deprive us of our freedom of creativity. We should not forget that in Genesis 1, nature was given to Man to consume – but also to cultivate and replenish. "Nature is the

“other” that Man is called to bring into communion with himself, affirming it as “very good” through personal creativity.”³ Man’s relationship with Creation is first and foremost rooted in the Eucharistic experience, which led St. John of Damascus to proclaim in his apology of the icons that the incarnation of God proved that all matter could be redeemed.⁴ “[...] all our own worship consist in the consecration of what is made by hands, leading us through matter to the invisible God.”⁵ Ultimately, it is through his relationship with Creation that Man fulfills his “royal priesthood”.⁶

¹ Met. John Zizioulas, *Lectures on Christian Dogmatics* at the Poemantic Division of the Thessaloniki University’s School of Theology 1984-1985.

² Ibid.

³ Met. John Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, Orthodox Peace Fellowship’s Occasional Paper nr. 19, summer 1994.

⁴ “I do not worship matter, I worship the God of matter, who became matter for my sake, and deigned to inhabit matter, who worked out my salvation through matter.” - *Apologia of St. John Damascene Against Those Who Decry Holy Images*, translated by Mary H. Allies. London: Thomas Baker, 1898.

⁵ St. John of Damascus, *Apologia*.

⁶ Met. John Zizioulas, *Preserving God’s Creation: Three Lectures on Theology and Ecology* at King’s College in Oxford, 1989.