



A eucharistic and ascetic ethos: Orthodox Christianity and the environment

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How to respond to the environmental crisis? For Orthodox Christians, this is less a matter of dealing with a 'contemporary issue' and more a question of making our lives consistent with our faith. This may explain why the focus for Orthodox is not on establishing moral rules or ethical principles but on rediscovering a certain ethos, an attitude to our social and natural environment.

The foundations for an environmental ethos, Orthodox believe, are the core beliefs of Christian theology. In Jesus Christ, the Creator of the universe has become part of his creation. He has done so through a creature fashioned from the earth so as to be in the divine image and likeness (see Genesis 1:26). This belief inspires both a reverence for our fellow-humans, and an awareness that we have been given this unique position – at once earthly and potentially divine – for the sake of all creation. And as a human being, Christ is risen from the dead – mysteriously transformed, yet still truly embodied. This proclamation of the Resurrection defines the way Orthodox Christians view the material world and its own potential for transformation.

Of course, this does not mean that all practising Orthodox would express things in this theological language. But theology is fleshed out and lived in numerous ways, in worship and in the everyday life of the observant Christian. That is why the Orthodox ethos is often described as 'eucharistic' (consistent with worship and sacramental life) and 'ascetic' (consistent with the spiritual way taught by the Church). Here follow some of the principal aspects of Orthodox Christianity that shape our attitude to the material world.

Creation images God

In Orthodox liturgical practice, the day begins with the singing of Psalm 104, which praises God in the wonders of his creation. We are affirming that the Creator is wholly present in his creation through his operations or energies, even while being totally distinct from it in his divine essence. The 'rationality' of the natural world – the fact that it has discernible laws, that it makes sense –



has been seen from earliest Christian times as an indication that creation bears the imprint of the Reason or 'Word' of God, who has become incarnate as Jesus Christ (see Romans 1:20). Similarly, the Holy Spirit is celebrated as 'filling all things'. On Pentecost, the feast of his descent upon Christ's apostles, the scope of this presence is made dramatically clear. In pre-Revolutionary Russia, a popular name for this feast was 'the name-day of the earth'; churches are festooned with green branches to celebrate the Holy Spirit's life-giving presence in every living thing. This is a practice that readily lends itself to environmental applications: at St Tikhon's Monastery in Pennsylvania, for example, they have recently started buying young fruit trees which stand in church for Pentecost and are then planted out in the grounds.

God communicates himself to us through creation

This is what happens in the sacraments of the Church: in the bread and wine of the Eucharist or the water of Baptism, God takes 'ordinary' material things which are part of his own creation and gives them to us as gifts of himself, of his own life. And so when we turn back to the world around us, we realise that nothing is 'ordinary': everything is an aspect of God's gift of life, a sacrament of his presence and merciful care for all creatures.

Besides the major sacraments, the Orthodox Church has many prayers of blessing: fruit is blessed at the feast of Christ's Transfiguration, and herbs and flowers on the Falling Asleep of the Mother of God, while houses, cars, fields and so forth are blessed when occasion arises. All this reveals both natural substances, and things we have made out of them, as vehicles through which we communicate with God, and he with us. Pre-eminent among such services is the Blessing of Waters (1), traditionally performed outdoors on the feast of Christ's Baptism (6 January). Many people have noticed how powerfully this service proclaims the Orthodox understanding of nature and the context within which we use natural resources, and a blessing of waters is now often performed at environmental events and conferences. Innovative uses of the service include an annual blessing of the snow pack on the Continental Divide in North America, sending blessed meltwater throughout the year into the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. Perhaps this can also stand as an image of that most important principle in tackling environmental problems: the far-reaching consequences of small actions.

We offer creation up to God

Central to the life of the Orthodox Church is the Divine Eucharist, an offering of thanks ('eucharistia' in Greek) not only for Christ's sacrifice but for everything that God has done for us, starting with the creation of the world. Searching for something to offer in return, we can find nothing that is not God's own already: 'Thine own of thine own we offer' (Divine Liturgy). One of the images most popular among contemporary Orthodox is that of creation as a 'cosmic Eucharist' and humanity as its priest: our use of the world is to be neither exploitation nor mere 'stewardship' of resources, but an offering to God's glory.

A eucharistic ethos is also an ethos of sharing: at the climax of the Eucharist, the priest prays God the Father to send down the Holy Spirit 'upon us and upon these gifts'. What becomes the Body of Christ is not only the bread representing the fruits of the earth, but the human community as well.

God has entered his creation

A striking instance of how Orthodox Christians relate to God through the material world is icons, the pictures of Christ and the saints so prominent in Orthodox churches and homes. The fact that we make such images, using elements from the animal, vegetable and mineral realms, testifies to the belief that God has truly become a part of his own creation; and when we venerate God through icons by physical actions, bowing before them and kissing them, we acknowledge that we ourselves are not disembodied spirits but physical creatures, an integral part of the earth in which we live.



The use of matter in icons changes our vision of both 'worked' and 'unworked' nature. As a product of human skill and art, the icon gives much-needed hope that technology need not be destructive: it can reveal the divine beauty and mercy in creation in new ways. And as a shaping of natural material to form an image of Christ, the icon can also be seen as 'decoding' the face of Christ already concealed in creation. Thus a contemporary Athonite monk, Elder Paisios (died 1994) could speak of even the grass and stones as icons, worthy of veneration because filled with God's grace (2).

The ascetic way

Ascetic disciplines once characteristic of the entire Christian tradition remain an integral part of Orthodox Christian life. According to the fasting discipline of the Church, for instance, Orthodox abstain from meat and animal products for approximately half the days of the year. 'Ascesis' simply means 'exercise': as physical exercise tones up our bodies, so ascetic exercise builds up spiritual health and strength. In particular, asceticism builds a healthy relationship with the world around us by progressively freeing us from the tyranny of our whims and appetites: as Orthodox writers and homilists often point out, this notion of 'freedom' is in marked contrast to the apotheosis of 'consumer choice'.

Fasting periods focus our minds on simplifying the way we live, leaving more resources, time and money to share with those in need. There is another, less direct way in which fasting promotes sharing of resources: fasting involves abstinence not only from certain foods, but also from conjugal relations. It is often observed that the rules of fasting, if strictly observed, will have a noticeable effect on population growth.

The monastic example

While asceticism is seen as the calling of all Christians, it is exemplified most clearly in the monastic life. Many Orthodox Christians have close ties with monastic communities (witness the weekend crowds at the Community of St John the Baptist in Essex), and the monastic tradition plays a central role in Orthodox spiritual life. The monk or nun is one who possesses nothing – the antithesis of consumerism – and monastic communities are typically characterised by great sensitivity to their surroundings, whether human, animal or inanimate. In a time when conservation too often means keeping people at arm's length, monasteries provide an important example of how using the world to serve human needs can also be a way for nature to participate in 'the glory of the children of God' (3).

Many monasteries today set an example to local people and visitors through organic farming practices and sensitive use of space and building materials: some examples are Chrysopigi (Chania, Crete), St John the Forerunner (Anatoli, near Larisa, Greece), Solan (near Avignon), and the Holy Myrrhbearers (New York State). To expose more people to the monastic example, Syndesmos, the World Fellowship of Orthodox Youth, has since 1994 been organising 'spiritual ecology camps' for young adults on Mount Athos and elsewhere. Sometimes monasteries work with environmental organisations, but their 'ecological living' is usually carried on with a minimum of fanfare. And correspondingly, its 'ripple effect' is manifest in the way individuals and families try to live their daily lives more often than in programmes and campaigns.

Holy people, holy places

As examples and guides for our lives, Orthodox Christians look to the saints, whether saints of past ages or contemporary people of outstanding holiness. The saint typically is someone whose love for God overflows to embrace not only his fellow humans but the entire creation as well. There are innumerable stories of holy people living in harmony with wild animals and with the earth itself. The much-loved eighteenth-century Russian saint Seraphim of Sarov was on friendly terms with a bear. Elder Amphilochios of Patmos (died 1970) was well-known for his love of trees and exhortations to his spiritual children to plant them on their smallholdings; as a result, large parts of the island are now green oases. Many Orthodox in Britain (and beyond) readily



embrace the early British saints and their harmonious relationship with nature; St Kevin, for example, is the subject of a recent Orthodox children's book (4). Such stories resonate with Orthodox Christians precisely because harmony with other creatures is such a strong continuing feature of holy lives. Many of our contemporaries who have visited holy ascetics can testify to this at first hand.

In Orthodox belief and experience, holiness is not merely spiritual. It is manifested in people's bodies and, by extension, their environment: the very places where such people have lived their lives are often tangibly imbued with prayer and grace. Many people in the contemporary West might be inclined to dismiss such beliefs as vestiges of medieval superstition. But think again: most environmentalists would be keen to affirm that humans are part of the Earth community, inextricably connected with everything in our natural environment. So how could we expect our environment not to be affected by God's grace in the human creature?

One who loves God, in the words of an Athonite saying, loves everything with the same love. The example of holy people reminds us forcefully that love for our fellow-humans and for other creatures must always be held together. This balance is exemplified in a recent initiative in Cyprus, where a permaculture project was started at Ayia Skepi in Filani, a detox centre for drug addicts founded by Bishop Athanasios of Limassol in 1999 (5).

Making the connections

Many homilists and hierarchs in recent years have explored the environmental implications of the Orthodox faith and ways to act on them. Perhaps the best known is Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople, one of the foremost advocates for the environment among contemporary religious leaders. Following the example of his predecessor who in 1989 established 1 September as a day of supplication for all creation, Patriarch Bartholomew issues an annual encyclical on that day, and repeatedly highlights environmental problems and their social implications in addresses to a wide variety of audiences (6). His international initiatives include the 'Religion, Science and Environment', shipboard symposia bringing together scientists, environmentalists, policy makers and representatives of world religions to consider threats to different rivers and seas – ranging from the Aegean (1995) to the Arctic (2007) (7); also, the 1999 Halki Ecological Institute to educate clergy and theologians from countries bordering the Black Sea about regional environmental threats, and Halki seminars on such topics as the environment and religious education.

Despite the political controversy still surrounding global warming in their country, the Standing Conference of Orthodox Bishops in America recently issued a statement on climate change and the responsibility of Orthodox Christians (8). And in theological education, an initiative for 'greening the campus' has recently been launched at St Vladimir's Seminary in New York, which receives students from many parts of the Orthodox world.

Notes

- (1) For text, see Mother Mary and Ware, Kallistos (tr.) (1969) *The Festal Menaion*, London: Faber and Faber, pp 348-359.
- (2) Belopopsky, A. and Oikonomou, Dimitri (ed.) (1996) *Orthodoxy and Ecology Resource Book*, Bialystok: Syndesmos, p 55.
- (3) Aimilianos, Archimandrite (1996) 'The Experience of the Transfiguration in the Life of the Athonite Monk' in: Golitzin, Alexander *The Living Witness of the Holy Mountain*, South Canaan: St Tikhon's Press, p 205.
- (4) Schroedel, Jenny (2004) *The Blackbird's Nest: St Kevin of Ireland*, Crestwood: St Vladimir's Seminary Press.



- (5) <http://www.youtube.com/index>, search for 'Markides, Skepi, permaculture' (accessed June 2008)
- (6) See texts and comprehensive introduction in Chryssavgis, J. (Ed.) (2003), *Cosmic Grace, Humble Prayer: The Ecological Vision of the Green Patriarch Bartholomew I* Grand Rapids, Michigan and Cambridge: Eerdmans.
- (7) See www.rsesymposia.org, the website of Religion, Science and the Environment, a movement conceived in 1988 on the Isle of Patmos, at a meeting of environmental and religious leaders, accessed June 2008.
- (8) www.scoba.us/statements/2005-07-08-scoba-statement-on-environment.html, on the website of Standing Conference of Canonical Orthodox Bishops in the Americas (SCOBA), accessed June 2008.

Useful reading and resources

Belopopsky, A. and Oikonomou Dimitri (ed) (1996) *Orthodoxy and Ecology Resource Book*, Bialystok: Syndesmos

Chryssavgis, J. (1999) *Beyond the Shattered Image*, Minneapolis: Light and Life Publishing
Hart, A. 'Transfiguring Matter: The icon as paradigm of Christian Ecology', at
www.aidanharticons.com

Ignatius IV, Patriarch of Antioch (1989), 'Three Sermons: A theology of creation; A spirituality of the creation; The responsibility of Christians', *Souroz* 38, 1-14

Kallistos (Ware), Bishop of Diokleia (1996) *Through the creation to the Creator*, London: Friends of the Centre

So that God's Creation might Live: The Orthodox Church responds to the ecological crisis (1994)
Ecumenical Patriarchate/Syndesmos

Theokritoff, E. (1999) 'From Sacramental Life to Sacramental Living', *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 44 nos.1-4, 505-524

Walker, A. and Carras, C. (eds) (1996) *Living Orthodoxy in the Modern World*, London: SPCK, esp. Bishop Kallistos (Ware) of Diokleia, 'Lent and the Consumer Society' and Metropolitan John (Zizioulas) of Pergamon, 'Man the Priest of Creation'

(Zizioulas) Metropolitan John (1989-90), 'Preserving God's creation', *King's Theological Review* 12: 1-5, 41-5; 13: 1-5.

Websites

www.orth-transfiguration.org, the website of Orthodox Fellowship of the Transfiguration, which will 'include Announcements, Programs, a Library of Orthodox materials on care for God's creation, and a list of ways that you or your parish might participate in the challenge of a right relationship to the earth.' (accessed June 2008)

www.ec-patr.org, website of the Ecumenical Patriarchate; click 'English' then click on 'ecological activities' (accessed June 2008)

www.goarch.org/en/ourfaith/environment, the environmental section of the website of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America (accessed June 2008)