

AN ORTHODOX VIEW OF THE ECOLOGICAL CRISIS

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1. *PROLOGUE.*

It seems that a great number of non-educated and educated people, churchmen and theologians included, have not yet realized that ecology and the ecological crisis have both a positive and a negative relationship to the Christian faith itself. Most of the above-mentioned people readily tend to ascribe the crisis to technology, industry and politics. Consequently, they believe that we Christians have a duty as citizens to contribute to every effort aimed at avoiding ecological catastrophe. They expect from clergy, theologians and believers to cooperate dutifully in the realization of programs planned by others, i.e. non-ecclesiastical authorities or religiously indifferent ecological movements, aimed at providing a political solution to the problem—without, however, uprooting the deeper causes of it.

It is clear that they view the ecological crisis as a purely socio-technological problem, belonging to the same order of every other social problem of past and present. They overlook the very fact that this problem embraces the whole question of man's place on earth and in the universe; it is a wholistic and global problem provoked by man's self-proclaimed, absolute and autonomic domination of the Earth.

1.2 The Distinction between Macro-Ecology and Micro-Ecology.

Although the ecological crisis factually and visually extends from the depths of the underground water resources to the ozon shield above, we have to distinguish between its micro-ecological phenomenology, and its macro-ecological essence. Regarding the first, the micro-ecological phenomena, we can easily ascribe the crisis to technological, industrial and political activity. But these visual causes of the problem are produced from roots belonging to causes of a different order; these ultimate causes are related to the human mentality, hidden behind the

natural facts and motivating the technological, industrial and political activity that promotes anti-ecological socio-ethical behaviour.

The human conceptions about the world, mankind and their interrelationship are the mental and psychological causes of the ecological crisis of our times. These ultimate causes ought to be described as macro-ecological.

The macro-ecological factor i.e. the human *mentality*, is part of the human being; it is the God-created personality, with its special and precious abilities and charismata, incorporated in it «after God's image». So, the state of the mind (mentality) and the condition of the human being are inseparable. Therefore, when we speak of the human mentality, we mean the spiritual condition itself. From this point of view, it is clear that we see the function of the human mind as an intellectual activity strongly and inseparably related to the Creator and to His creation. Strictly speaking, the ecological crisis is not a question of mankind's relationship to nature alone, but a question of relationship to the Creator and His purpose in creating the world. This is the macro-ecological view of the problem. The micro-ecological aspect is man's activities and use of the world, as side-effects of the macro-ecological human view of the same.

1.3 *What is and What is not the Macro-ecological Problem.*

In order to avoid the frequent misunderstandings of the subject and its relation to the faith, a negative vs a positive definition of it seems to be needed.

So, from the macro-ecological point of view, the ecological problem is not the disposal of worldwide wastes; neither is it the destruction of the natural beauty or the loud noise of the towns or the threatened animal life. All these are symptoms and consequences of the problem, but not the problem itself.

From a positive point of view, the ecological crisis is related to:

- a) the consumption of the natural resources needed for our biological survival and for the continuation of our civilization.
- b) the increase of the pollution of the same natural resources, e.g. water, air, sea, ozon shield, etc.
- c) the destruction of forests, plants, etc.
- d) the use of uncontrolled or misuseable natural powers, such as radioactivity.
- e) the production of new—and heretofore unknown to the natural

laws — chemical combinations, that cannot be incorporated into the process of decomposition.

f) the destruction of the musical harmony of nature and its aesthetic beauty; the first contributes enormously to our inner equilibrium, the second is, among other things, an irreplaceable factor of artistic inspiration. In relation to this, I would like to present the opinion of an early Christian writer, the Apologist Athenagoras (2nd century A.D.), who wrote: «The beauty upon the Earth is not self-made, but is sent from the hand and the opinion of God».

The above-mentioned catatrophical symptoms are provoked by human activity. But it is well-known that every human activity is strictly related to man's *mentality*.

The acts of free man concern absolutely the Christian Church; the Christian Orthodox Church makes a distinction between free act and free will, because as Paul said: «all things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any» (I Corinthians 6,12).

1.4 *The Ecological Authority.*

We have to ask ourselves, who has the responsibility for the contemporary human attitude towards nature? Who formed the macro-ecological causes of the ecological crisis? These questions could be answered through other questions, such as: who have the authority and the responsibility to teach mankind about its relationship to nature? Theology, Philosophy or both? An univocal teaching of the truth could be very important for the solution of this threatening problem. But within the last four centuries, such a teaching has not come forth. Philosophy has been separated from Theology, going its own way and creating another cosmological view: one without God. That view has promoted the contemporary technological and economical — and at the same time catatrophical — exploitation of the Earth.

We believe that: a) the churches have the full responsibility to confront the ecological problem from its macro-ecological aspect; this aspect corresponds absolutely to their nature and their mission. b) the appropriate activity, in questions of the micro-ecological aspect, has to be related to the macro-ecological, e.g. wholistic view, (*sub specie aeternitatis*).

Avoiding the old question about the relationship between Theology and Philosophy, as a separate subject, we, the believers, ought

first of all to face the Ecological Problem not from its micro-ecological (see above 1.2), but from its macro-ecological aspect. The macro-ecological aspect has to be purely theological, because Christian Theology has the ultimate right to speak with authority about the relation between Nature and Mankind; This right is centuries-old, based on Divine Revelation.

We Christians ought to realize that our conceptions about God, Christ, World, Mankind, Salvation and the Church are correlated to the present-day ecological problem, both to its creation and to its solution.

If we were to suppose that Holy Scripture and the Christian Faith, as Holy Tradition, have nothing to do with the problem because it is a new one, then we are obliged, according St. Basil of Caesarea, to act as if the subject were a «silent» one (*sesiopemenon*) in the Bible. The Christian's stand towards that problem has to be governed by the following principles:

a. The principle of freedom, according to the Apostle Paul (I Corinthians 10,23): «All things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but all things edify not».

b. The principle of responsibility for others, according to the same apostle (I Corinthians 10,24): «Let no man seek his own, but every man another's wealth».

c. The principle of obedience to God or to others, according God's command. This last principle is conclusive, according Basil of Caesarea: «therefore it is by every means necessary to obey God, according to His command, or others, because of His command» (*Moralia* 6, BEPES 53,61-62).

But, the Ecological Problem does not belong to the silent subjects of Holy Scripture; the opposite is true; it belongs to the capital subjects of our faith. The subject of the natural environment of mankind, as natural conditions, are correlated with the others needed for it, i. e. social and divine. All three conditions are present in the three first chapters of the Book of Genesis. The biblical foundation of Ecology runs through the Bible till its last book, the Revelation of St. John, which ends with the ecological catastrophe.

The undivided Church formed its faith according the Bible and the Holy Tradition on the subjects God, World/Nature, Mankind and their interacting relations. We Orthodox have as our duty to share with Christians of other Churches and denominations this venerable Holy Tradition in searching for the way to serve mankind. According

to that Tradition, defined mostly in Ecumenical Councils, the teachings of our faith about God, Christ, World, Mankind, Original Sin, Salvation, Church, Eschatology are the pillars for the formation of a Christian answer to the Ecological Problem from its macro-ecological aspect and for guiding and illuminating our contribution to the world-wide community, as well.

2. *MANKIND AS THE ECOLOGICAL FACTOR.*

There is no hesitation about the exclusive factor of the ecological Problem, i. e. mankind. Mankind by acting wrongly provoked the ecological crisis, but misguided actions are not a permanent and original natural tendency in man, but an elective activity, formed by his mentality: the human conception about himself, about the world and about God. Mentality is the way of thinking; the human «nous» (mind) is the center that motivates the destructive activity against nature.

2.1 *Man's Mind as Divinely Created.*

«Nous» (mind) is a God-created organ for the benefit of man; it is part of his composition as being created «after the image of God» (Gen. 1,26). According to the teaching of the Church Fathers, man does not possess the «image of God». Only Christ is «Image of God»; man is created «after the image of God», «in the image of God». Man is *image of the image (Christ) of God*. This divine gift is interpreted by Orthodox Theology throughout the centuries as implying innumerable mental, spiritual and ethical abilities, such as the intellect and the spirit, free will, stewardship, and the participation in the divine energies etc., leading to the «*omoiosis*» (likeness) of God.

2.2 *Man's Mind as the Intellectual Factor.*

2.2 Basil of Caesarea says that the «nous» (mind) is good and in it we have the image according to the Creator» (*Letter 233*). The human mind is the «throne of the deity, and the throne of our mind is the deity and the spirit» (Macarius the Egyptian, *Spiritual Sermons*). The human mind has a natural ability to move continually (*ἀεικίνητος* ever-moving), either towards its Creator or away from Him. This first tendency of the human mind has been diminished because of Man's Fall. In spite of that, there is, after the salvation wrought by and in Christ, an equally balanced tendency between the God-oriented and God-averted

mind. But, he who wills and prays seeking help, receives the divine assistance (Macarius the Egyptian). Thus the human mind is not left alone in the world to manage its own problems.

All human activities are either solved or not solved by man's way of thinking, which is either God-oriented or not. The Christian thinking is God-oriented, therefore the Christians have to possess a different mentality; «the world of the Christian is different» says Macarius the Egyptian «and his manner and mind and word and action are different». The human mind is God-oriented after the salvation in Christ i. e. after its purification from its sins and after illumination through the Holy Spirit. Through salvation the mind regains its original objectivity, receiving the Creator's grace and behaving properly to His will.

3. *MANKIND'S THREE-DIMENSIONAL ENVIRONMENT.*

The Holy Bible proclaims that mankind has a three-dimensional bond of relationship towards creation, towards mankind and towards God. All these kinds of relationships are needed, and they are for mankind's benefit.

3.1 *The Composition and the Integrity of Nature.*

Starting from the study of the Bible because as Basil of Caesarea says «the greatest way to find the appropriate task is through the study of the inspired Scriptures» (*2nd Letter, to Gregorios* BEPES 55,14), we recognise the three biblical states of the natural environment: the original, its negative conversion and the cause or factor of its conversion. All are expressed in Genesis. The first in chapter 1 and 2, and in Ezekiel 28,13 f. «the second in ch. 3, and the third in chapter 2 and 3, as well as in Ezekiel 28,15f, and in John's Revelation, ch. 13ff.

Regarding the original natural environment of original mankind, we see waters, i. e. sea, rivers; plants, i. e. fruit-trees, decorative-trees, etc.; animals and minerals. And all these were made by God who saw that the natural environment «was very good». This last evaluation includes the categories of order and harmony, which were expressed in ancient Greek thought through the word «cosmos», i. e. ornament. According to St. Gregory Nanzianzen «the Maker-Logos joined everything in order that it be cosmos, as it is said, and inaccessible beauty; and nobody can create anything more brilliant or more magnificent», (*Oratio 6, Eirenikos*, P.G. 35,740C). The natural world, earth included,

has God-created integrity that must not be abused by human activity, for it belongs to the absolute dominion of God.

Man's natural environment is on Earth; «Divine Scripture clearly teaches us that paradise is under this heaven, in which the sunrises and under which the Earth is to be found», (Theophilus of Antioch, *ad Autolycum* B, 24 BEPES 5,37-38).

3.2 *Mankind's Social Environment.*

In the Bible (Genesis ch. 1-3) the truth is expressed that Man was created as a social being, thus distinguishing him from every other living creature, not equivalent to him («for Adam there was not found an help meet for him», 2,20), *Man* and *Woman* are the divine start of the human society» Man's *sociability* reveals that mankind depends upon society; he does not act alone: he creates everything co-operating with others; he has joint responsibility. Hence Justice and Peace are indispensable factors.

3.3 *The Divine Environment.*

From the macro-ecological aspect, God's existence, presence and communication with mankind, and vice versa, is a *sine qua non* environmental *condition* for humanity. This fact is stated very clearly throughout the Bible. Acting without God or against Him is associated with man's decline and destruction (Gen. ch. 3).

The negative, destructive side of this relationship is stated in St. John's Revelation (ch. 13ff). There the destruction of nature and mankind results from the self-proclaimed deification of man i. e. as humanistic atheism or humanistic deism. This, again, is characterized by the absolute prevalence of the Political Economy, as synonymous with the atheism, leading, first, to the enslavement of mankind, and secondly to ecological destruction. Consequently, ecological destruction is produced by the acute crisis between Divine and Political Economy, in the sense that Political Economy predominates in the present-day situation.

4. *Man's Relationship to the Natural Environment.*

The presence of man in the natural environment was conditional. The conditions were three: (a) the statement about the God-created environment, (b) the divine will for the nurturing of mankind, (c) the

divine mandate, regarding man's behaviour in his natural environment and, last but not least, the perpetual recognition of God's absolute dominion in the world.

The statement about the God-created environment as a precondition for the survival of mankind is underlined in the Bible; «And the Lord God planted a garden eastward in Eden; and there he put the man whom he had formed», Gen. 2,8).

4.1 *The Divine Will for the Nurturing of Man.*

Through the expression of a practical will, God places the dependence of biological survival on nutrition taken from the natural environment: «And God said, Behold, I have given you every herb bearing seed, which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree, in the which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed; to you it shall be for meat» (Gen. 1,29). And, again: «And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat» (Gen. 2,16). Interpreting these passages Macarius the Egyptian (*Homiliae Spirituales* P.G. 34, *BEPEs* 41,151) says: «God gave man all the management (*oikonomia*) of life from without i. e. the world. This dependence from outside is valuable for the soul as well; «In the same way also the soul» says Macarius the Egyptian, «depends on God's grace».

4.2 *The Divine Mandate about Human Action in the Environment.*

This mandate is clearly expressed in the passage: «And the Lord God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden *to dress it and to keep it*», Gen 2, 15). It is very clear that «to dress» means every kind of cultivation, i. e. exploitation of the earth for human aims. But, «to keep» puts a limit on the exploitation, and means of acting for the preservation and maintenance of the earth. This divine mandate is both a mandate for management of the natural resources on earth and a placing upon him of full responsibility for them. Mankind is practically proclaimed an «*oikonomos*» (manager, steward, administrator, governor), but not a Lord or Despot of his environment. That is a very clear distinction made by the Bible. Under this distinction we have to understand the divine blessing of man: «And God blessed them, and God said unto them, 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).

4.3 *Man's Instruction through the World.*

Man's knowledge and his activity are connected; knowledge is gained by his mind from the environment, i. e. from God's creation. There are different kinds of knowledge, such as practical and theoretical knowledge, above all, however, is the «knowledge of God», the Creator. The so-called *Natural Theology* is a traditional pillar of Orthodox Theology. The Church Fathers underline constantly that through examining of the creation one can arrive at certain conclusions about the its Creator. Man ought to seek this, because, according the Psalms (18,1) «The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handy-work».

The world through its laws, magnificent systems, and superb harmony educates man how to behave towards creation, towards others and towards God.

Man creates, using the material of the world, and by «imitating» the laws of the divine creation. This «imitation» is a by-product of his creation «after God's image» Doing things, man «imitates his Creator, like the image imitates the original», said Patriarch Photius (8th cent.). But the harmony between human and divine creativity depends on the harmony between man's and God's mind; only a God-minded humanity creates with respect for God's creation.

Again, the harmony of the natural world teaches us that peace is the *sine qua non condition* of its existence; a very useful teaching for our social life, indeed.

The world has, according Basil, a moral significance; it is a moral school for everyday life, i. e. the grass and the flowers of the field, being so short-lived, teach man the vanity of life and human nature, as the prophet Isaiah (40,6) has already observed. The moon, by its waxing and waning, also gives a striking example of man's nature and fate, for, though it can from nothingness increase to a full capacity, at the same time it is subject to a sudden failure and diminution, etc.

The natural world is a training ground for man. This patristic interpretation of man's relationship to nature is the basis of the laborious spiritual exercise or ascetism, which marks the whole life of the Orthodox Church (fasting, etc.).

4.4 *Mankind's Service to God through Creation.*

God communicates through His creation with man, teaching him His existence and dominion over creation. But, only Man possesses,

through his special creation, the ability to seek his Creator and to articulate by worship and actions his respect for the Creator. We read in the Minutes of the Seventh Ecumenical Council (787 A. D.), Leontius of Constantia's statement: «I, through heaven and earth and sea and woods and stones and through relics and temples and the cross, and through angels and men and through the whole creation, visible and invisible, offer to the Creator and Lord and Builder alone obeisance and adoration. Not by itself does creation offer directly obeisance to the Builder, but through me (man) the heavens declare the glory of God, through me the moon worships God, through me the stars glorify Him (*Mansi* 13:48-49).

The material elements used in the worship, according the Apostolic Tradition of the Orthodox Church, are means of recognition of God's Creation. This recognition leads to the sanctification of creation, to the glory of God, the Creator.

Throughout the centuries Orthodox Theology has taught that the deification of the natural world is idololatriy and the overdependence upon it practical materialism. The patristic teaching, based on St. Paul's declaration that ungodly «changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever. Amen», (Romans 1,25), criticizes the misuse of creation and warns the believers to avoid dependence on the increase of material goods. To subdue human life to the material is the same as to reverse God's blessing of dominion over the material creation (Gen. 1,28).

5. The Original Ecological Crisis as Destruction of the Integrity of the Three-dimensional Environment.

The human drama is combined with man's original relationship to nature, as absolute dependence upon it. This original attitude marked man's history through the responding reaction of nature to his whole existence. Man's relationship to God his Creator was expressed as the correct or incorrect relationship to God-created nature. The Ecology, was the field of expression of man's attitude towards God, as self-determination, combined with obedience to God's will. Mankind failed in this and provoked a capital disorder upon himself; and upon the natural world, also: «For the creature was made subject to vanity, not willingly but by reason of him who hath subjected (the same) in hope... For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now» (Romans 8,20,22).

Church Fathers such as Basil of Caesarea underline that Adam and Eve's fall was due to their free will and the misuse of their self-determination; the beginning and root of the original sin was man's self-determination. Consequences of it were: a) their expulsion from Paradise, and deprivation of all its blessings b) the vileness and corruption of the image of God. Man's intellect, will, emotions and physical constitution suffered a deterioration, etc. Thus the consequences were anthropological, social and ecological.

6. The Three-dimensional Consequences of Man's Salvation.

Man's original sin against God has had ecological consequences. Contrariwise, man's salvation through God's incarnation in Christ changed man's attitude towards nature. The ecological crisis shows that man's salvation has to be expressed and fulfilled in conscious faith, in proper worship, in Christian ethics, but also in right-doing towards nature. We have to remember that the natural world is the manifestation of God's power and love for us. We have to respond properly, respecting God's creative work as part of our adoration to the triune God.

7. The Church as an Ecological Institution.

The Church was founded by God as His people, from the beginning of mankind's creation. Man was separated from his Creator through the original sin. Through God's incarnation in Christ, mankind was saved, purified and strengthened through grace, received by the Holy Spirit, to follow his Creator's will.

The Church as a divine institution organised in human bodies, has man's salvation as its main responsibility. Through the faith and activity of its members, «members of Christ», it has as its duty to extend salvation to the natural world, which suffers because man's fall.

Ecology is the framework in which man's salvation is realized. Salvation works in the opposite way from that of the fall. The mission of the Church for man's salvation and human activity in the environment are not identical; they are however unseparable. The ecological aspects and the behaviour of the believers have to be correlated with their faith in the Triune God, as the Creator, the Lord and the Saviour of man and world.

This ecological view of the Christian faith is clearly expressed in the Theology, worship and ascetic life of the Orthodox Church. God is worshipped as the «builder of all», as «the king of the Creation», as

«the Lord of the creation» etc. Especially in the hymnography of Holy Week (Easter), the world is referred to as suffering for Christ's Passion, but also rejoicing in His Resurrection.

7.1 *The Macro-ecological Responsibility.*

From the theological point of view, the ecological crisis is in a sense the contemporary repetition of the original sin: mankind seeks after the quantitative and not the qualitative domination of the earth; for his *greater and* not his *best* presence in the world.

Today most of man's activities are subordinated to the principles of political Economic thinking while ignoring the irreplaceable principles of the divine Economy. The consequences of this way of thinking and acting are very vividly foreseen in the Book of St. John's Revelation, as ecological catastrophe.

7.2 *Church's Micro-ecological Contribution.*

The solution to the ecological problem passes through the salvation of mankind, through the renewal of man's mind in Christ. The Church, as the «laboratory of salvation», as the living body of Jesus Christ in the social environment, has to assist in the fulfilment of salvation, through its teaching and Mysteries, through worship and ethical behaviour, through Christian Macro-Ecology, which is inseparable from the Divine Economy. The mind, our mind, has to regain its pure attitude towards nature. Modern man must realize that he is «oikonomos» (a steward) of creation in order to abandon his present-day despotic behavior towards it. Christians ought not only to contribute to our salvation, but also to extend it to nature, which suffers because of our sins.

8. *Orthodox Spirituality and Ecology.*

The spirituality of the Orthodox Church possesses an ecological significance, because a) it is based on the idea of freeing one's self from dependence on material things and pleasures, b) it considers this life and world as a training ground preparing us for eternal life, c) it seeks the sanctification of the mind and intellectual perfection, aiming at the likeness of God.

The ascetic life, marked by the decrease in the consumption of and independence from the material, shaped the practice of fasting on all levels (clergy, monks, laity) within the Orthodox Church, And I think

that it is time for all Christian Churches and denominations to look seriously at the ancient ascetic spirit of the undivided Church. It could be a valuable practical contribution to the micro-ecological problem.

9. *Ecology and Ecumene.*

The Orthodox Church looks upon the Ecology and the Ecumene as related: both words in Greek have as a common component: the word «oikos» (home). Generally speaking, Ecology is that science which deals with man's natural environment. Ecumene in its original sense refers to the land inhabited by man.

I think that the various churches and denominations, which co-operate in the WCC, have to reexamine their teaching and preaching, their worship and their activities in regard to man's relationship to the natural world from the macro-ecological view-point. Subjects like Triune God and Ecology, Original Sin and Ecology, Salvation and Ecology and the human mind, Ecology and Divine vs. Political Economy, Christology and Ecology, Ascetic Spirit and Ecology, Worship and Ecology, Ecumene and Ecology await further study and can greatly contribute to the solution of the Ecological Problem.