
EASTERN ORTHODOX THEOLOGY AND PRACTICES RELATED TO ECOLOGICAL ISSUES

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Abstract

Ecology is the art of assuring the management of a house. In the Byzantine theology, the house was both the home where each person fulfilled his or her vocation as social being, as well as the inhabited area, which was regarded as a larger home, the inhabited world or God's home. Technically speaking, the object of the study and knowledge of ecology is the interaction between ecosystems, the practical wisdom of exploiting, maintaining and communicating to the future generations the ecosystem that constitutes the life environment of all living beings.

Keywords: eco-theology, ecology, pilgrimage, education, creation

1. The Creator's rationality – the source of human rationality

The human person is seen in theological treatises as a priest or a crowning of creation, owing both to the way he comes into being and to the responsibility he is assigned in the created environment and in solidarity with it. In his theology, St Basil states "creation must find its origin in a personal and reasonable cause not in the idea that the humans have about creation" [1], meaning that the humans, who were created "in God's image" (cf. *Genesis* 1:26), are themselves rational. Being rational means being receptive and willing to communicate, a view confirmed by the Holy Scripture which presents the integrity of the human person as a dual element, the man and the woman, who consciously and freely cultivate a relationship of communion and solidarity. Communion means the shared veneration of the Creator, the recognition of His authority as well as concrete examples of co-participation in His work.

The rationality of the human person, owing to his created nature, is visible in the fact from the very beginning he had to make a rational and unrestrained choice between pursuing the individual welfare and that of the environment he was granted to live in. The biblical story of creation reveals several different levels of representation, ascending from very simple to the complex, making human beings understand that God is not only the Creator of the inert existence

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but also of the rational one be it the human persons or the angels, through whom He communicates with the creation that lacks rationality. This is why St Gregory of Nyssa affirmed that 'wisdom is contemplated in creation, which is the word, albeit not formulated'. The main rationale of the care for the creation was given in the very fact that it is the fruit of God's personal, loving work, Who saw that "it was very good." (Genesis 1:31) [2] Creation is therefore the result of the work of a rational being, having definite role and purpose, having as His partner the created rationale who was to become like God by His grace.

The linguistic account of the creation is plain, direct, without any scientific pretence, because it renders an elementary reality that did not need to be wrapped in a complex literary form, which would give rise to interpretations. The text is even said to have a "ritualistic pace", conveying a sense of majesty and a certain rhythm and a visual dynamic, especially when the text is listened to [3]. The text itself is proof that it was not intended as a scientific representation of the process of creation, but a lively image of the bounty of God, which we experience again only in the last book of the Bible, the Revelation.

The creation itself contains in itself God's covenant with the human person as a cosmic reality, as they include the whole created universe, through the mediation of humanity which was entrusted the created things, that are subject to annihilation or disappearance, or salvation. God wanted it from the very beginning to be eternal, for "God's gifts and his call are irrevocable" (Romans 11,29). The human persons were to lead the creation to eternity, because not only humanity, but also the whole nature and the surrounding world were created and destined for eternity.

Eventually, the human damaged their relation with God through a personal mistake. His reason was darkened by the Devil to believe that he can be independent of the Creator. This is why Christianity at large, and especially Orthodoxy advocates the idea of restoration both of the human inner nature corrupted by sin and of the liberation from the bonds of evil of the whole creation, which exists in solidarity with the human. This can be achieved through the purification of the mind and the soul, the release from the passions that bind the human to the material goods, which become one's goal in life and a means of satisfying cravings, and which engender antagonisms between the rational and irrational things and competition that concludes in extinction and death.

2. Creation and sin

The human person was created in harmony with the whole universe, having the mandate to remain in harmony with the Creator, by his own free will. The account of creation reveals a glorious image of the universe acting upon God's will: the waters separate, the sky appears, the seas calm down and everything is part of a logical and harmonious process of organisation.

The human beings were there to rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air... and over all the creatures" (Genesis 1,26), but he was the first to

refuse to obey God, by a basic act of defiance: using matter irrationally for a supposedly good purpose: being "like God, knowing good and evil" (Genesis 3:5). More precisely, the visible sin consisted in taking, by their own will, more than they needed, which caused a rift with the universe they lived in and constant conflict with it (Genesis 2:16). The invisible part of the sin was the human persons' arrogance and lack of respect towards Creation and its Creator. The human person turns use into abuse, by self-sufficiency and greed. By this, he turned out to be self-centred namely isolated by his own irrational desires. The ecological problem is not therefore a recent issue, and has to do not only with water, air and soil, but also with the health of soul and the awareness of conscience. God calls attention to the primacy of spiritual health whenever He heals any medical deficiencies and physical disabilities. The health of the soul, understanding the ways God communicates with us, cannot be separated from the health of the body and of the life environment, which have theological connotations. One can support this statement by the numerous healings performed by Jesus Christ proving His care for the human dignity and life as a holistic reality. Yet He always linked bodily healing to the spiritual health. This must be applied to environment, too: deprived of any spiritual value, the creation seems to be justified only for the material exploitation of its resources.

The original sin was *inter alii* a revolt against moderation. The responsibility of the human being is not confined only to the human dimension; it has to do with the whole community and nature in its entirety [4]. The result of sin is more conspicuous in suffering, pain and death (Genesis 3:16). The Garden of Eden ceased to be beautiful and welcoming and sin did not affect the first people only. The Holy Scripture of the Old Testament provides further examples of the humans' hostility to Creation (Leviticus 18:25, Deuteronomy 29:22-25, Amos 4:7 and Revelation 8:10-11).

In keeping with the precepts of the Scriptures, the human persons had the right to "govern" the land, or to make it "comply with" higher principles, yet later theologies interpreted them as a "right to exploit", considering that the environment was given to the human beings so that they should satisfy their needs and procure their happiness independently from divine will. According to Bishop John Zizioulas the deliberate destruction of the environment is a sin, not only as a matter of life and death, but also as one concerning the eternal life. The loss is infinite and eternal [5]. The modern person is not different from the first couple, as they consume more than they need, transforming feelings into passions and necessity into greed.

The human being has always been one with nature in fall, the Apostle Paul writing that the whole creation "groans under the burden of sin" (Romans 8:22), and it should be in redemption, too. Redemption is a process that has to do both with the human person and with the creation, as both have to restore the harmony with God, in a process that is called *theosis* or deification, becoming like God, by God. A true Christian is not preoccupied with conquering nature and dominating it, does not see his own personal initiative as a means of achievement, does not claim the right to initiative, but is keenly aware that the

universe is the macro-*anthropos* while the human person is a micro-*cosmos*. The Church is the milieu where this view originates, the Church being the sacramental body of Christ, extended in the world, which is "the icon of the universe, made of visible and invisible essences, because like the world, the cosmos contains unity and diversity, thus the created world is divided into a spiritual world, full of essence, and a corporeal world, ingeniously created out of various and numerous forms and essences." [6]

The most important problem facing the Churches today, both in a moral and material form is poverty, its most dramatic form being famine. Securing food for an increasing population is the main preoccupation of technology and science nowadays, too. The error lies in the fact that during the last decades this concern was unilaterally directed towards improving the means of production and multiplication and less towards the preservation of the created nature as a gift given to all people. Thus, some still take more than they need, while others starve. Morally, this is the discrepancy where the notion of "natural contemplation" [7] disappears from theology and practice of Christian faith.

3. Church prayers and practices

The focal point of the Church's attitude and practices related to the environment is the belief in God as a Trinity of Persons. This justifies the sharing and continuous discovery of His Sacraments by the human persons and of the human persons among them. One can even speak about a "mutual revelation" occurring when people talk or pray together. God as source of communion constantly communicates His love to the creation. This means that the human beings have the daunting task of ensuring the survival of God's creation.

This is best seen in the liturgical experience of the Church, in which the world is dynamically represented in each Holy Liturgy (Gr. *leitourgia* = "work of the people"), also called the Eucharist (Gr. *Eucharisto* = "to thank"). In the Liturgy, not only the human is present, but also God, who sanctifies everything, the invisible beings, the heavenly powers and the human beings, all united in serving the Creator and respecting the creation, which is consecrated by the priest and symbolically offered to God. The priest offering the gifts of bread and wine before their transformation into the Body and Blood of Christ, in the Holy Liturgy of John Chrisostom and Basil the Great that have been celebrated in the Orthodox Church ever since fourth century, using the following pronouncement: "*Your own of Your own we offer to You all things, for all creation!*" The human being takes a piece of nature, which belongs to God, and lays his own mark, reshaping it in a personal manner, and returns it to God in the form of bread and wine, and He, in turn, communicates sacredness to the human being, who is restored in communion with the Creator, through the sanctified gifts.

The Liturgy is essentially the transfiguration of nature by the sacramental acts that unite all people, at all times and in all places, the earth and the heaven, the visible and the invisible world, the created and the un-created. It involves

sacrifice, because it is the bloodless re-enactment of Christ's sacrifice on the Cross. From the liturgical sacramental space, sacrifice as renunciation of personal desires and passions must enter into the living space of everyday life, as the Romanian theologian Ion Bria said [8].

The Orthodox Church also has further ways of expressing involvement in nature and in human life: prayers for the blessing of the land before sowing, blessing of the harvests and the first crops, consecration of the waters at the Epiphany and of the gifts brought to the Church for the Liturgy, of household animals, prayers for restoration of health and for the sharing of God's grace with people and their living environment in moments of crisis. The image of the human beings living outside the rest of creation is false, and the current situation of the environment reveals them being almost terrified and dependent on nature, as described in Psalm 103: 15-17: "He makes grass grow for the cattle, and plants for man to cultivate - bringing forth food from the earth: wine that gladdens the heart of man, oil to make his face shine, and bread that sustains his heart"

4. Ascetism – the most elaborated form of eco-theology

Ecology is not exclusively the science of administering the environment, but also a matter of practical theology. While Western theology has often tended to differentiate between the academic theology, that is the one of universities, and practical theology, the one experienced in Christian communities, Orthodoxy has formulated a complementary expression of theology and spirituality. For instance, an ordinary day for a Christian living in a traditional village of Romania begins with a morning prayer, followed by work on the land that provides sustenance, the thanksgiving prayer before and after each meal, the practice of community life in the family, in the parish and in the surrounding nature that is seen as a gift from God; the day ends with a prayer expressing one's gratitude for the passing day and asking for peace in the night to come.

Genuine Orthodoxy recommends temperance, as it does not see the acquisition of goods as the calling of the modern man. It seeks to preserve the boundary between nature as an object of human exploitation and nature as an illusion, affirming that nature is the means by which the human can achieve eternal life. It follows in the line of the Patristic teachings according to which nature is not a "thing" but another being which co-operates with another nature that is the human being [4, p. 209]. The practice of the Church is motivated above all by the vision of man as a pilgrim on earth whose duty is to pass on a wholesome environment for the future generations.

Ascetism represents the freely assumed pilgrimage and the harsh form of care for the environment and of attention devoted to God, since its main message is that it is not man, but God who dominates the earth and that man should willingly obey God as this would be to his own advantage. The image of God in man does not exclusively concern his soul, but also his body, which should be

treated with moderation. *Askesis* - ascetism has been practised in Orthodoxy from early Christianity until the present day and has a double dimension: the abstention from giving the body what it desires through the concupiscence of sin and also strengthening the will in refusing what is desirable for man and gladly accepting what is pleasing to God (the daily practice of an ascetical monk, obeying his spiritual father or the abbot, is a struggle to do what he does not do for the sake of higher ideals). The aim is to dominate sinful passions, to have ascendancy over the material world by abstaining from what can be negative and to restore the status man had in Paradise.

In parallel with the abstention from anything that can be spiritually damaging, the ascetic intensifies the spiritual practise of liturgical life and the permanent thanksgiving for what God has offered as his gift to the world. This is why the monk spends much of his time praying and contemplating. The moderation he exercises is the state of normality that Adam was not able to respect in the Garden of Eden. For this reason the monk is also said to bear "the angelic face". Besides the education of the human person abstinence means respect for the creation, as the monk does not damage it or exploit it excessively, because he only takes what nature has to offer. His attitude should not be seen as hatred of whatever is natural or of the material world, but rather as a different understanding of our divine gifts. In many cases, ascetic monks live in perfect harmony not only with lifeless nature but also with the wild beasts that seem to understand their spiritual message and work for the welfare of the human person.

By relying on reason and will, the monk or the hermit submits the material world to spiritual ideals, such as the restraining of the primitive passions and desires related to possession, reproduction and pride. What matters to the ascetic monk is not the personal existence but the relationship with God and the fellow human persons, the constant thanksgiving to the Creator, which has caused certain theologians to call the Christian a "*homo eucharisticus*".

Ascetism denounces the world dominated by man without hating it or man, but showing that the right way is totally different. The monk follows Joels' exhortation: "Rend /our heart and not your garments" so that God should pour out his spirit over all His people (Joel 2, 28).

5. An overview of the Romanian situation

One could not speak of "ecological awareness" during communism, although depriving the people of access to material goods somehow protected nature. A Swiss theologian visiting Romania in 1990 confessed: "the forests of Romania are of a special kind. The trees are more healthy, and the forest has a genuine wilderness which can no longer be seen in the West, where every tree is inventoried." The situation has changed since then and the forests of Romania are not the same. The communist agriculture damaged the soil through the excessive use of chemical fertilisers aiming at ever increasing record crops. This practice stopped after 1990 so that one can say that the Romanian village is not seriously contaminated nowadays and genetically modified products have not

yet been produced in Romania. There are certain laws regulating environmental protection yet their implementation largely depends on time and a change of mentality, such as: the Government's Ordinance 34/2000 concerning ecological products; Law no. 166/2002 regarding forest exploitation; Government Decision no. 917/2001 containing methodological norms for the implementation of ecological legislation. Romania has also closed the negotiations with the EU on ecological issues, in view of the imminent integration and will also adopt the specific EU legislation.

The environment has a low profile in Romania. There are several causes for this situation: one of the chief causes is the ambiguous land ownership and redistribution law, which has caused excessive delays. Arable land and forests are not considered private property so that land exploitation has been unsystematic.

There is also the remarkable increase in the number of private cars, most of which are highly pollutant and the deforestation of mountains to produce raw timber, sold at a very low price compared to the European market. This has also a social consequence for many local workers lose their jobs. Another source of pollution are the industrial units using outdated equipment lacking proper filters and often releasing highly pollutant substances in rivers, which has led to several ecological disasters. Among the most significant ones, during the last period, we need to mention the pollution of the rivers Lăpuș and Tisa, caused by an incident at the gold mine Aurul Baia Mare; the pollution of the rivers Lăpuș and Tisa, in the year 2000; pollution of the river Siret in 2001; Arieș, etc. through accidents caused mainly by negligence and the managers' lack of environmental conscience.

The Church is highly aware of the ecological imperatives and the need for intensified cooperation to achieve them. But to the general concerns such as less contaminated air and water, biodiversity, wholesome fertile soil, reducing the loss of nutrients through levigation, fighting soil erosion, economical use of water, nutritive quality of ecological products, reduced use of non-renewable resources, protecting the environment for the future generations, work and sustenance alternatives for families in rural areas, she adds the spiritual dimension because the world must realise that the issue at stake is not how we live, but the life in itself. However, her voice is silent or silenced by the social, economic, and political factors that see "development" as a more important priority than the ecological issues.

6. Initiatives and facts: a Romanian case

The sustainability of the environment is, from the religious point of view, first and foremost, a question of divine decision: "when you take away their breath, they die and return to the dust" (Psalm 103:30). This is what the modern human being ignores, while acting like God's substitute, who presumably owns the environment. This must be part of the eco-theological education developed

by the Church in cooperation with educational bodies, restoring in the mind of the modern man the role of God in the creation.

In a recent article, a Romanian journalist was asking rhetorically: will Romania stay as an oasis of natural fertile land in the sea of chemically modified Europe, or will it spoil its land for the sake of larger production? Romanians are at present concerned more with reshaping the map of properties, meaning that the land, which was abusively taken by the communist state from the owners, must be given back and this question will not get a quick answer. The process takes a long time, although it is on the right track.

The future integration in Europe contributes to the Church's understanding that resources need to be used efficiently; its guiding principle is that the presence of the Church and of the parish or monastic community should not have any damaging influence on the environment. From the very beginning, those who established monasteries made sure that the monastic settlements would not be in conflict with the surroundings and would not exploit its resources unwisely.

The Romanian Orthodox Church owns a little part of the arable land and of the forests, being able to constitute a model of care for a sustainable eco-management and agriculture. There is a concern to promote ecological production on Church lands. To achieve this goal the Church needs the input and collaboration of professional and specialised institutions, which can offer the necessary training and information regarding this type of agriculture. Romanian monastic lands are known everywhere for such natural products as: therapeutic herbals, wild berries, and medicinal teas. Even the monastic diet allows a gentle, considerate approach of nature, in view of the fact that about half of the ecclesial year is made up of periods of fasting, the monks thus taking only what nature offers them.

The Church carries out its activities in the rural areas of Romania against a background of poverty. On one hand people need at least some land and nourishment and on the other hand their education is limited. The overemphasis on industry during communist years caused many Romanians to migrate to the urban areas. Now, with the closing down of the inefficient industrial plants, people return to villages where they have to start a new life. This is a new environment where the education for ecologically aware agriculture should be promoted. In this field, the Church has been a partner of various specialised EU and US organisations and foundations such as: World Vision International, but the results are yet too modest.

The priest plays an important role, as he is, traditionally, the person with the greatest authority in the rural community. A pilot-programme has been implemented in a poor parish near the city of Iasi, where the priest has implemented various programmes. In some parishes – a foundation set up by the village priest has developed links with the EU-funded Romanian Fund for Social Development (F.R.D.S.), S.A.P.A.R.D., Phare and USAID. With input from World Vision International and other international bodies they have implemented a programme for small size farms (raising animals, greenhouses for

vegetables) – all in an area often affected by floods and by river pollution, with access to only one source of fresh drinking water.

In the long run, the Church could be involved in educating people through the media it owns, by establishing protected areas, especially around the monasteries, now exploited by tourists, setting up information and support centres for ecological farming.

7. Education for ecology: the theology of pilgrimage

The tradition of pilgrimage has an important role in Romania. In the Orthodox tradition pilgrimage involves struggle and renunciation. Thus, the pilgrims visit and worship holy sites, monasteries, icons or burial grounds of great Church personalities without expecting top-class board and lodging facilities. Quite often pilgrimage is seen as an exclusively spiritual endeavour during which one has to eat sparingly, walk a lot, sleep less and in modest conditions, and make offerings to the poor and to the holy site.

The Romanian Orthodox Church has set up several Pilgrimage centres that provide specific services and also promote ecological education. The pilgrim is required to have a decent and deferent behaviour in the monastery and the surrounding area and towards the monastic community, which abides by different laws than the lay world.

The pilgrim is seeking spiritual meanings in creation, is fully aware of the need to respect life as a gift of God and aims to achieve communion with God, with himself and his fellows, and with nature. Pilgrim guides or tour leaders seek to promote the awareness of Church membership and the significance of Christian identity and of the responsibility towards God's creation. The Church has initiated educational pilgrimage programmes for young people as well as spiritual ones for the elderly.

For all pilgrims, the encounter with the sacred milieu of a monastery is a personal experience that makes them aware of the harmony between man and nature, in those distant places in the mountains and forests, where monks and nuns consecrate the waters and the crops and practise intense fasting and contemplation. The education through pilgrimages is an alternative to the "temptations" of the modern world that foster violence, indifference and inhumanity.

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