Nature as Living Icon: Ecological Ethos of Eastern Orthodoxy

by Elizabeth K. Zelensky

“I have a longing for life and I go on living in spite of logic. Though I may not believe in the order of the universe, yet I love the sticky green leaves as they open in the spring. I love the blue sky.”

F. Dostoevsky, The Brothers Karamazov

“Love all of God’s creation both the whole of it and every grain of sand. Love every leaf and every ray of God’s light. Love the animals, love the plants, love everything. If you love everything you will perceive the divine mystery in things. And you will come to love the whole world with a complete and universal love. Love the animals: God has given them the rudiments of thought and joy untroubled. Do not trouble it, don’t harass them, don’t deprive them of their happiness, don’t work against God’s intent. Man, do not pride yourself on your superiority to the animals: they are without sin, and you, in your greatness, defile the earth…”

F. Dostoevsky, The Brothers Karamazov

“She firmly believed in a certain power that bore the same resemblance to God as the house of a man one has never seen, his belongings, his greenhouse and beehives, his distant voice, heard by chance in an open field, bear to their owner… this power had no connection with the Church, and neither absolved nor chastised any sins. It was just that she sometimes felt ashamed in the presence of a tree, of a cloud, of a dog, or of the air itself, which bore an ill word just as religiously as a kind one.”

V. Nabokov, Glory

I begin this brief introduction to the Eastern Orthodox Christian view of nature and the environment with two quotations from Fyodor Dostoevsky’s The Brothers Karamazov and an excerpt from Vladimir Nabokov’s Glory, because for much of the non-Orthodox world, the first acquaintance with the Christian East as a system of values comes about through reading literature, not least among which is that of Russia’s great novelists. In view of our looming ecological crisis both Ivan Karamazov’s hymn of praise to the life-giving power of spring and Father Zosima’s plea for the universality of love
to include all of creation, Doestoevsky’s words are more poignant today than when they were first published, more than one and a quarter centuries ago, in 1879. The Nabokov citation, with its mysteriously open-ended depiction of the religious sensibility, is a compelling insight into a world view which recognizes God’s presence hovering on the very edge, or within the shadow of every perception, of the natural world. Dostoevsky and Nabokov, both raised as Orthodox Christians, have condensed into their fiction the echo of a fundamental paradoxical precept of Orthodoxy: in the face of the absolutely Transcendent and Unknowable God, the acknowledgement of His Immanence or Presence in all of creation, and thus of creation’s sacral aspect. How Orthodoxy expresses this belief and its potential resonance with our contemporary understanding of humankind’s responsibilities towards the environment, is the focus of this paper.

The identification of God with the goodness of creation—the original basis for the concept of divine Immanence—may be found in the Bible, a text sacred to all “three people of the book,” Jews, Muslims and Christians: “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth…the firmament…divided the water from the earth…created the stars and the sun and moon, and through them the seasons, days and years…the plants, the animals and God saw everything that he made and, behold, it was very good (Genesis I: 1-31).” It is the unambiguous nature of this assertion about the intrinsic “worthiness” of creation that sets the parameters for our discussion: nature is a good in and of itself for most traditional Christians, including the Eastern Orthodox.

To underscore the continuity over time and space of this idea, let us turn from nineteenth-century Russia (Dostoevsky) and twentieth-century Berlin (Nabokov) to fourth-century Roman Mesopotamia, where St. Ephraim the Syrian, hymnographer and theologian of the early Eastern Church, sang the praises and wonder of God’s Presence throughout creation in the following words:
There is one being, who knows himself and sees himself....
He is before all and after all, And in the midst of all.
He is like the sea, In that all creation moves in him.
As the water surrounds the fish and feels it
So do all natures feel God,
He is diffused through the air, And with the breath enters into thy midst.
He is mingled with the light, And enters, when thou seest, into thy eyes.
He is mingled with thy spirit, And examines thee from within, as to what thou art.
In thy soul he dwells.²

St. Ephraim’s hymn may be treated as an amplification and embellishment of one of the main prayers of the Orthodox, the prayer to the Holy Spirit: “O Heavenly King, Comforter, Spirit of Truth, Who are everywhere present and who fills all things, Treasury of good things and Giver of life: Come and dwell in us, and cleanse us of all impurity; and save our souls, O Good One.” This prayer is read as part of the daily cycle of private devotion, before any new undertaking—especially those of an intellectual nature—during every Saturday service at Vespers, as well as on Pentecost: the feast day which celebrates the founding of the Church on earth through the descent of the Holy Spirit on the Apostles, fifty days after the Resurrection. Through this prayer, creation is presented as something dynamic, ever-changing, diverse—directly linked to the infinite “Energies” of God as the manifestations of His goodness, mercy, justice, and beauty here on earth. A certain degree of concordance between the concept of “Divine Energies” and that of the Islamic doctrine of the Divine Attributes, or Ninety-Nine Names of Allah, may be noted here, although the latter are not in any sense personal or hypostatic.³

Dating back to Maximus the Confessor (580-662 CE), the Orthodox view of creation stresses its dynamism; every created being is separate from God, though linked to Him through the presence of its own logos, or meaning that was given to it by the Almighty at the moment of its incipience. This logos is not simply a static template, however, but the eternal task towards which all must strive, within the limits
of each creature’s particular degree of sentience. This task is to fulfill in temporal existence the potential assigned to it by God in eternity. The gulf between potential and actuality implies movement, kinesis, which is an essential condition for participating in the “Divine Energies” of God. This nuance of indeterminacy and open-endedness of outcome echoes, however faintly, the idea of freedom, which lies at the heart of the Orthodox Christian understanding of creation as a purely voluntary act of God’s love beyond and outside all necessity. This freely given affection ties every created being, animate and inanimate, spiritual and material, with the ultimate source of meaning: Christ as Logos, as the Eternal Word, coexisting outside of time and space with the Father and the Holy Spirit in the form of the Trinity: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God” (John I:1).

Here it should be stressed that dynamism, constant interrelation and interaction between the Three Persons, man and the world, is the metaphor most commonly applied by the Eastern Church Fathers to the mystery of the Trinity. For example, during Pentecost, the official feast day dedicated to the Trinity and commonly known in the West as Whitsunday, this living connection between God and creation is stressed through words and images. The words of the feast day hymn express this sentiment: “Blessed is our Lord Jesus Christ since he sent us most wise fishers of men, having inspired them with the Holy Spirit, and thus having captured the whole cosmos in the net of your salvation.” On this day, green altar clothes decorate the church and the clergy wear green vestments while believers decorate homes and churches with flowers and leafy branches from trees and bushes, strew cut grasses on the floors of churches, and carry bouquets of living flowers—all of which serves as a sign of taking joy in the God-given beauty of the natural world. Countess Sophie Tolstoy, wife of Leo Tolstoy, describes the following ritual for Pentecost (or Whitsunday) in her diary entry for June 9, 1891: “Whit Sunday….We heard the strains of peasant women singing as they approached the house and we went out and followed the crowd to where they wove [sic, wreaths, EKZ]. There is something very moving about this endlessly repeating spectacle. Every summer, for almost thirty years, ever since I have been at Yasnaya, they have woven [wreaths] and thrown them into the water.”

Not only flowering branches and grasses, but also water, incense, candles—and finally, the bread and the wine of the Eucharist—are all part of the Orthodox worship ritual on Pentecost, and, moreover, in various combinations throughout the year. These are not simply treated as symbols of higher realities, but as actual embodiments of the presence of God in this world: the material of the natural world is taken to be an active participant in the drama of humankind’s fall and salvation, reiterated every Sunday and feast day through prayer, ritual and hymns. The interactive dynamism that characterizes
the Orthodox interpretation of nature’s relationship to God and man may be inferred from portions of a wide range of Orthodox services, including, for example, in the Liturgy of St. Basil, during which the Virgin Mary is praised with the following words: “In Thee rejoice all creation.”

Likewise the vital, interactive, participation of nature in Christ’s sufferings is imperative to Orthodoxy, as illustrated in the readings for the Good Friday Matins Services:

“All creation was changed by fear when it saw you hanging upon the cross, O Christ. The sun was darkened and the foundations of the earth were shaken. All things suffered with the Creator of all.”

And:

“When it beheld You crucified, O Christ, all creation trembled. The foundations of the earth shook for fear of your might. The lights of heaven hid themselves and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. The mountains quaked, and the rocks were split…”

Man’s tragic hostility towards Creation, as symbolized in the above passage, goes back even further than the Crucifixion. Adam’s fall pulled death and decay into the world, and not only man, but nature itself also fell prey. This idea is expressed, for example, in the following passage from St. Paul’s Epistles to the Romans: “For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain until now (8:22).” The same theme figures in the writings of St. Simeon the New Theologian (949-1022 CE), as cited in The Philokalia, one of the most widespread texts of popular devotion in pre-revolutionary Russia:

“All of creation when it saw that Adam was cast out from paradise no longer chose to obey him, a criminal; the sun no longer wished to shine for him, nor the moon, and the other stars did not want to show their faces to him, the springs no longer wanted to bring forth water, and the rivers wished to cease to flow, and the air thought it would stop blowing, so as to keep Adam from breathing after he had sinned.”

As humankind is the cause of creation’s downfall, so it must also be the source of its transfiguration. Creation cannot transfigure itself, lacking the discernment of free will, it can only be transfigured through the prayers and actions of man. In the words of St Leonidas,

“Through heaven and earth and sea, through wood and stone, through all of Creation visible and invisible, I offer veneration to the Creator, the master and maker of all things. For the Creation does not worship the Maker directly and by itself, but it is through me that the heavens declare the glory of God, through me that the moon worships God, through me that the stars glorify him, through me that the waters and showers of rain, the dew and all Creation worship God and give him glory.”

Or, in the words of Seyyed Hossein Nasr, speaking from the viewpoint of the Sufi tradition, “All of nature is hungry for our prayers.”
Just as nature needs man to fulfill its true destiny—the return to a state beyond biological necessity, pain, fear and death—so man needs nature as a curb on his limitless ego and capacity for self-delusion. Russian theologian and philosopher Pavel Florenskii (1882-1937) described humankind’s dependency on matter as “the beneficial pull of the earth, which, as it limits us, also gives us a point of support...it sets up the limits of our fate, and through these limits provides us with the God-like opportunity to practice creativity and free will,” and, ultimately, love. We humans cannot learn to love God or each other instantaneously; we make mistakes and we need time and space to rethink and rectify, to grow enough to be able to choose to actively participate in the Divine Energies; thus, our dependence on the material world is of an ontological nature, since it is through matter that the blessed gifts of time and space make themselves known to us.

While there are many examples in Orthodoxy of the dynamic relationship between the Holy Spirit and creation, one of the most beloved and well-known is Andrei Rublev’s icon “The Trinity” (see illustration).

Its subject is three angels in the guise of travelers enjoying Abraham’s hospitality beneath the shade of the oak of Mambre (Genesis 18:1-8). It was composed as an Old Testament prefiguration of the Trinity, for the Trinity-Sergius Monastery near Moscow, at the beginning of the fifteenth century. The spring green cloak draped about the Third Person, who symbolizes the Holy Spirit, is a direct reference to the world of nature and all of its beauties. The staffs in the angels’ hands and the draughtsmen square depicted on the front of the table refer to the metaphoric plane of measuring, ordering, and building, in this way linking the composition with the theme of Divine Wisdom.

Divine Wisdom, an allegorical figure originally found in the Old Testament (Proverbs 8:22-24,27; Sirach 1:4, 24:10; Wisdom of Solomon 7:26), and later conflated with the eternal aspect of Christ as Logos (I Corinthians I:24) by early Christian Church fathers, such as Ephraim and Maximus, became the personification of God’s creative endeavors in the Orthodox system of imagery: “Before the mountains were settled (8:25) While as yet He had not made the earth, nor the fields (8:26) When He prepared the heavens I was there; when He set a compass upon the face of the depths (8:27) When He established the clouds above (8:28) When He gave to the sea His decree, that the waters should not pass his commandment (2:29).” The elements of proportion, order, categorization, which are foregrounded in Proverbs 8, provide a vision of chaos giving way to cosmos or order. This order is prepared for man, and man is introduced in Proverbs 8:31-32: “I was daily His delight, rejoicing always before Him...rejoicing in the habitable part of His earth and my delights were with the sons of man” exclaims Wisdom, resonating with Genesis 2:7, which describes the seventh and final day of creation when God “formed man of
The dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life.”

The Tuesday evening readings in the Lenten Triodion emphasize the link between the *logoi* and the Logos as being central to the relationship between creation and Creator using Old Testament Wisdom imagery: “Before the ages the Father begot me, His creative wisdom, He made me the beginning of His ways for His works, which now have been mystically perfected. For being by nature the uncreated word, I make my own the words of that nature which I have now assumed.” After the Incarnation of the Godhead, in human form as Jesus Christ, all humans came to be linked with the eternal Logos and thus directly implicated in that Sophic destiny, which each creature must work out through its divinely assigned task or particular *logos*. Here again, one may find certain analogies between Orthodox Christianity and the idea of cosmic laws found in the traditional religions of the Orient: “*shari’ah*” for the Muslims, “*tao*” for Taoists, “*dharma*” for Hindus. Each posits the existence of one common transcendent Law in the universe, which ties all creatures together, including that most active element, man.

The Pentecost icon shown below depicts the actual circumstances surrounding the descent of the Holy Spirit on the apostles fifty days after the Resurrection, and illustrates the link between the fate of nature and of man (see illustration).

In this icon the apostles sit grouped about a table, and above each one’s head flickers a flame, the sign of the Holy Spirit. Beneath the table, in what appears to be a chasm at their feet, there stands the figure of a bearded old man with a crown upon his grey head. In some variations the figure holds twelve scrolls in a linen cloth, in others broken chains hang about his wrists. The figure is always labeled “Cosmos” and it symbolizes the state of fallen creation, subject to the grim laws of necessity and mortality due to Adam’s fall, but now also freed through the possibility of redemption opened by Christ’s Crucifixion and Resurrection.

The view of the natural world as a good and beneficial place, whose grace or *barakah* is so strong that it lies beyond formal divisions of faith, underlies a type of religious syncretism once prevalent in the Ottoman Balkans, of which traces can be found to the present day. A system of sacred
geography, structured around natural sites such as grottos, springs, pools, mountaintops and groves, was honored by Muslims and Christians alike. Even as recently as 2010, for example, both Christian and Muslim worshippers came to a grotto in the mountainside at the Ostrog Monastery in Montenegro to visit the relics of St. Vasilii of Ostrog on Pentecost. At the Church of St. Petka in Belgrade, a sacred spring has been a site for pilgrimage from at least the fifteenth-century onwards for the Orthodox, Catholics and Muslims. Early twentieth-century sources tell us that on Pentecost both Muslims and Christians would cast wreaths of flowers onto the spring water's surface, before it was confined by pipes and forced to flow through a spigot as part of the general modernization of Kalemegdan Park, which now surrounds it.

This tradition of worshipping in the midst of nature's beauties finds theological support in the Muslim notion of the *ayat*, or the deciphering of certain natural phenomenon as living symbols or letters which reveal God's purposes in this world as part of the cosmic Quran (*al-Qur'an al-Takwini*) -- and in the *logoi* of St. Maximus. Both stem from the belief that creation is filled with God's presence, that it is a dynamic participant in the cosmic dance of Divine Energies, through which its destiny is tied to that of humankind. "He is the God of the living" (Mathew 22:32), and this includes not simply man, but all of creation itself. This brings us back to the figure of Sophia, the Wisdom of God, as the personification of God's creative endeavors.

By tracing the popularity and frequency with which churches were built and dedicated to Sophia, the Wisdom of God, in the Orthodox world over the centuries, one finds an inverse relationship between interest in the idea of Sophia, the Wisdom of God, and a belief in the sanctity of nature and in its vitality and dynamism. In Byzantium, at the height of the Eastern Roman civilization, the Great Church of Hagia Sophia—dedicated to 'the Logos as Wisdom'—was the center of the Eastern Orthodox world and was emulated throughout the sphere of Byzantine political and cultural influence. In far–off eleventh-century Rus’, the two largest cities, Kiev and Novgorod, both dedicated their main cathedrals to Divine Wisdom, and they were not alone in this choice. However, as the centuries progressed, fewer and fewer churches were dedicated to the Logos in the Orthodox world. It may be argued that this was due to the loss of the prestige suffered by the Byzantine Empire itself in 1204, after the sack by the Fourth Crusade, and its final demise following the Ottoman conquest in 1453. However, the shift can also be explained by another factor, namely the decision by Peter I (1682-1725) to adopt Western-style reform and education for the political nation of Russia, which assured the ever-expanding influence of the West in Orthodox intellectual life. The acceptance of Cartesian dualism as the basis for all intellectual endeavor, including theology, sounded the death knell for the notion of Sophia. Descartes’ famous assertion that creatures are
automatic like, or living machines, is characteristic of the entire secularist mindset—in this system, matter is inert, lifeless and has no connection whatsoever to humanity. As the elite of Russia became increasingly westernized, official Church interest in Sophia waned, and came to be marginalized in the esotericism of theosophy and heresy. The unparalleled degradation of Russia’s natural environment that followed the Communist revolution of 1917 is the culminating point of a movement of separation from Sophia that begun in Russia over two centuries earlier and that continues, to a certain extent, to the present day.

The impending environment crisis, however, is not limited to Russia’s shores, but is a sad fate shared by the nations of the world. The contemporary Orthodox Church under the leadership of the last two Ecumenical Patriarchs of Constantinople, Patriarch Dimitrios and Patriarch Bartholomew, has put this crisis at the forefront of its institutional attention. Fifteen years ago, Patriarch Dimitrios issued the first official ecological encyclical, declaring 1st September to be a day of prayer for the protection of the environment. It began with the following words:

“This Ecumenical Throne of Orthodoxy – in its responsibility to protect and proclaim the centuries long spirit of patristic tradition as well as in its effort to faithfully interpret the Eucharistic and liturgical experience of the Orthodox church - watches with great anxiety the merciless trampling and destruction of the natural environment caused by human behavior, with extremely dangerous consequences for the very survival of the natural world.”

Man as God’s steward and chief priest—giving thanks (eucharistia) and offering all of creation in a transfigured form back to its Divine Source—must begin to heal the rift created through his self-centeredness between creation and Creator. As the angels perpetually praise God (Isaiah: 6:3; Luke: 2:13), so humankind must go back to its Edenic liturgical function and thus recover its original fellowship with the rest of creation.

Fifteen years later, in 2004, Patriarch Bartholomew’s 1st September encyclical was much more grave—“Today we stand at the crossroads, namely at a point of choosing the cross we have to bear”—reflecting the ever-growing crisis in our environment. Indeed, most scientists consider that the Earth’s biosphere, the world as we know it, is entering a state of crisis due to man’s activity. The effects of global warming and continued rates of carbon release into the atmosphere are predicted to wreak havoc upon our living planet: large scale rapid changes in climate, the rise of global sea level by 1-meter within the next 50 years, ocean acidification resulting in the death of most coral and other shellfish within the next 50 years, and the rapid extinction of many plant and animal species. The predicted changes promise to profoundly alter our living planet.

As Patriarch Bartholomew states, it is no longer possible to avoid the cross—the time of reckoning is upon us. The only solution open to us is
that of self-denial, self-discipline, and restraint. And it is at this moment in history that the way of asceticism, never fully abandoned by the Orthodox and expressed, for example, in the vision of St. John Climacus (“A monk without possessions is master of the entire world”), offers a possible way out. We have come to a parting of the ways—will we continue to exploit and waste, or will we save the world and ourselves?

The words of Maximus the Confessor offer a concise and poetic summary of these ideas: “Man can turn the whole earth into Paradise only when he carries Paradise within his own heart.” The relationship between anthropology and ecology is clear: the spiritually degraded man cannot exert a transfigurative force on the world around him, rather he will project his inner chaos, aggression and self-loathing outwards, resulting in the crisis that surrounds us. Bearing God’s image and likeness, man alone can, and must, speak for the rest of Creation before God. Thus, man’s relationship to the environment from the Orthodox understanding is an aspect of his relationship to God. The rejection of Sophia, the Wisdom of God, entails the loss of a mutually comprehensible language between the Creator and Creation.

Allow me to end this brief examination of the Orthodox attitude towards creation, and thus the environment, with a brief citation from another of the Eastern Church Fathers, Isaac the Syrian – born in the region which is present day Qatar – whose book of homilies was owned in an 1858 edition by Fyodor Dostoevsky:

“What is a heart full of charity? It is a heart that burns with love for all creation, for humans and for demons, for all creatures … The man who possesses such a heart is moved by an immense compassion … He cannot endure that any sorrow, however trivial, should be inflicted on any creature. For this reason he prays even for irrational creatures, for the enemies of truth, for those who harm him, that they be protected and receive mercy. He prays even for reptiles, impelled by the infinite compassion that burns in his heart in the likeness of God.”

St. Isaac the Syrian, Homily 8.

Notes

1 All Biblical citations, unless otherwise noted are from the King James Bible.
2 http://www.monachos.net/content/patristics/patristictexts/156-ephrem-daisan (Accessed April 5, 2012).
3 Samuel Zinner, Christianity and Islam: Essays on Ontology and Archetype (London: Mathers Trust, 2010), 95.
4 The above explanation is a simplification of a much more sophisticated exposition of Maximus the Confessor’s creation theology as summarized by J. Meyendorff in his magisterial opus, Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes (New York: Fordham University Press), 35-41, 129-137.

7 St. Leonitus of Cyprus as cited by Bishop Kallistos Ware in The Orthodox Way (Crestwood, NY: Saint Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1995). Ware quoted St. Leonitus within the following context: “Man is the priest of all creation through his power to give thanks and to offer creation back to God” (54).

8 Nasr, “Nature is hungry for our prayers, in the sense that we are like a window of the house of nature through which the light and air of the spiritual world penetrate into the natural world,” in The Essential Seyyed Hossein Nasr, ed. William C. Chittick, for. Huston Smith (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom Inc., 2007), 35.

9 Meyendorff, Byzantine Theology, 134.

10 Павел Флоренский, Иконостас (Санкт Петербург: Азбука Классика, 2010), 22.

11 Bishop Kallistos Ware, “Time: Prison or Path to Freedom,” The Inner Kingdom (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2000).

12 The former prominence of Sufi brotherhoods, such as the Bektashi, in this part of the world most probably facilitated this religious syncretism. H.T. Norris, Popular Sufism in Eastern Europe. Sufi Brotherhoods and the Dialogue with Christianity and ‘Heterodoxy’, 8 “The Bektashi have for the book of their faith the Universe”, 12.

13 Boris Ljesevic, interview by the author, Belgrade (Serbia), Oct 12, 2011.

14 Dusan Ivencevic, Beogradska Tverzhava I Yene Svetine (Belgrade, 1970), 82, 136, 144.


16 Г. Флоровский, “О почитание Софии Премудрости Божьей в Византии и на Руси” Труды пятого съезда Русской академической организации за границей, Ч.1, София, 1932, 485.


18 Patriarch Bartholomew, On Earth As in Heaven, 23.

19 Meyendorff, Byzantine Theology, 136.


22 Patriarch Bartholomew, On Earth As in Heaven, 200.

23 Ibid., 202.


25 Alexander Schmemann, Church, World, Mission: Reflections on Orthodoxy in the West (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1979), 42.

26 The Brothers Karamazov, ed. Susan McReynolds Oddo (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011), n.4, 50.