New Heaven, New Earth: Christian Theology and Ecological Worldview

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The world is a burning bush of God’s energies.
St. Gregory Palamas (14th century)

The world is charged with the grandeur of God!
Gerard Manley Hopkins

Introduction: The Hallmark of Humility

We have come to appreciate that the crisis that we are facing is not primarily ecological; indeed, it has less to do with the natural environment and more to do with spirituality and, in the Orthodox case, icons (the way we perceive creation). It is a crisis concerning the way we envisage or imagine the world. Our prayer for “a new heaven and a new earth” (Rev. 21:1), requires us to have a new worldview. Ironically, if we are honest about the task that lies before us, then the earth, too, will celebrate; the earth, too, will cooperate. As His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew declared jointly with the late Pope John Paul II in Venice (2002):

It is not too late. God’s world has incredible healing powers. Within a single generation, we could steer the earth toward our children’s future. Let that generation start now.¹

Therefore, our concern for the environment does not result from superficial or sentimental romanticism: it arises from our effort to honor and dignify God’s creation. It is a way of paying attention to “the mourning of the land” (Hosea 41:3) and “the groaning of creation” (Rom. 8:22). This is the reason why the Ecumenical Patriarchate has organized, among other initiatives, a number of international and inter-disciplinary symposia² at bodies of water, over the last decade: in the Aegean Sea (1995), the Black Sea (1997), along the Danube River (1999), in the Adriatic Sea (2002), the Baltic Sea (2003), on the Amazon River (2006), as well as in the Arctic (2007) and on the Mississippi (2009).³

For, like the air that we breathe, water
is a source of life; if defiled, the very essence of our existence is threatened. Tragically, however, we appear to be caught up in selfish lifestyles that repeatedly ignore the constraints of nature, which are neither deniable nor negotiable. Unfortunately, there will be some things that we learn about our planet’s capacity for survival only when things go beyond the point of no return.

Over the past two decades, perhaps no other worldwide religious leader has persistently proclaimed the primacy of spiritual values in determining environmental ethics as Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew; yet during the same period the world has witnessed alarming ecological degradation, increasing failure to implement environmental policies, and an ever-widening gap between rich and poor. Thus the hallmark of the Patriarch’s initiatives – and indeed the efforts of any of us – is not success, but in fact humility. I believe that a sense of modest realism is what ultimately connects with creation. Yet, in its own distinctive way, the earth unites us all: beyond any individual or collective efforts, and certainly beyond any doctrinal or racial differences. We may or may not share religious convictions or political principles, but we do share an experience of the environment: we share the air that we breathe, the water that we drink, and the ground that we tread—albeit not always equally or fairly. However, by some mysterious connection that we may not always understand (and sometimes choose to ignore), the earth itself reminds us of our interconnectedness.

This is surely also the deeper connection between religion and environment. This connection with the environment is something the Ecumenical Patriarch feels is greater than himself: indeed, something greater than his (or any) church or faith. Religion is what suggests a sense of permanence here – seeing and making sense of things beyond ourselves and our needs. This is why healing a broken environment is a matter of truthfulness to God, humanity and the created order. Patriarch Bartholomew was the first to dare broaden the traditional concept of sin – beyond individual and social implications – to include environmental damage! Some fifteen years ago, he declared:

To commit a crime against the natural world is a sin. For human beings to cause species to become extinct and destroy the biological diversity of God’s creation; … to degrade the integrity of the earth by causing climate change; … to strip the earth of its natural forests, or destroy its wetlands; … to contaminate the earth’s waters, its land, its air, and its life – all of these are sins.4

We shall return to the notion of sin and repentance below. For now, however, it is important to acknowledge that religion clearly has a key role to play; and a spirituality that remains uninvolved with outward creation is ultimately uninvolved with the inward mystery too. The environment is not primarily a political, economic, or technological issue; it is, as already observed, a profoundly religious and spiritual issue.
Orthodox Vision: Three Ways of Perceiving the World

One of the hymns of the Orthodox Church, chanted on the feast of the Epiphany, a feast of renewal and regeneration for the entire world celebrated annually on January 6, eloquently articulates this tragedy:

I have become the defilement of the air, land, and water.

Yet, how do we reverse the process of defilement or pollution? How do we repent for the damage we have wrought upon our planet? How do we return to the vision presented in the Genesis account of creation and re-presented in the lives of those who have lived in harmony with nature?

Orthodox theology and spirituality presents us with three helpful ways of restoring within ourselves a sense of wonder before God’s creation:

- **icons** (namely, the way we perceive creation);
- **liturgy** (namely, the way we celebrate creation); and
- **asceticism** (namely, the way we respect creation).

The Iconic Vision of Nature

A holy sense of nature implies that everything that breathes praises God (Ps. 150:6). When our heart is sensitive to this reality, then “our eyes are opened to discern the beauty of created things” (Abba Isaac the Syrian). Seeing clearly is precisely what icons teach us to do. The world of the icon offers new insights; it reveals the eternal dimension in everything that we experience. Our generation, it may be said, is characterized by a sense of self-centeredness toward the natural world, by a lack of awareness of the beyond. We seem inexorably trapped within the confines of our individual concerns and in so doing we have disconnected this world from heaven, inadvertently desacralizing both. Subsequently we have broken the sacred covenant between ourselves and our world. In such a case, the icon restores; it reconciles.

The icon reminds us of another way of living and offers a corrective to the culture that we have created, which gives value only to the here and now. The icon reveals the inner vision of all: the world as created and as intended by God. Very often, it is said, the first image attempted by an iconographer is that of the Transfiguration of Christ on Mt. Tabor. This is precisely because the iconographer struggles to hold together this world and the next; to transfigure this world in light of the next. The icon articulates with theological conviction our faith in the heavenly kingdom. It does away with any objective distance between this world and the next, between material and spiritual, between body and soul, time and eternity, creation and divinity. The icon speaks in this world the language of the age to come.

This is why the doctrine of the divine incarnation is at the very heart of iconography. For, in the icon of Jesus Christ, the uncreated God assumes a creaturely face, a beauty that is “exceeding” (Ps. 44:2), a “beauty
that can save the world.” (Fyodor Dostoevsky). In this respect, the entire world is an icon, a door opening up to this new reality. Everything in this world becomes a seed. “Nothing is a vacuum in the face of God,” wrote St. Irenaeus of Lyons in the second century; “everything is a sign of God.” Thus, in icons, rivers have a human form; so, too, do the sun and the moon and the stars and the waters. All of them assume human faces; all of them acquire a personal dimension – just like people; just like God.

The Liturgy of Nature
What an icon does with matter, the liturgy does with time. If we are guilty of relentless waste in our world, it is perhaps because we have lost the spirit of worship. We are no longer respectful pilgrims on this earth; we have been reduced to mere tourists. Our original sin lies perhaps in our prideful refusal to receive the world as a sacrament of communion. This means that what we do on earth matters for what we believe about heaven. The way we relate to other people on earth reflects the way we pray to “our Father in heaven.” And, by extension, we respond to nature with the same sensitivity, the same tenderness with which we respond to human beings. Herein is a profound connection between heaven and earth.

Liturgy, then, is precisely a commemoration of this innate connection between God and people and things. It is a celebration of communion, a dance of life. When we recognize this interdependence of all persons and all things – this “cosmic liturgy,” as St. Maximus the Confessor described it in the seventh century – then we will begin to resolve the environmental crisis. For, then we will have acquired, as St. Isaac the Syrian noted in the same century:

A merciful heart burning with love for all of creation – for humans, birds, beasts, and demons – for all God’s creatures.

The world in its entirety comprises an integral part of the liturgy. God is praised by trees and birds, glorified by the stars and moon (Ps. 18:2), worshiped by sea and sand. There is a dimension of art and music in the world. This means, however, that whenever we reduce our spirituality to ourselves and our own interests, we forget that the liturgy implores God for the renewal of the whole polluted cosmos. And whenever we narrow life to our own concerns and desires, we neglect our vocation to raise creation into the kingdom.

The Way of the Ascetics
Of course, this world does not always feel or even look like heaven; a quick glance at the suffering inflicted through war is sobering enough. Nonetheless, St. Paul writes:

Through Christ, God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross (Col. 1:20).

Reference here to “the blood of the cross” is a clear indication of the cost involved. There is a price to pay for our wasting. And this is the value of ascesis;
for, genuine asceticism can lead to a spirit of gratitude, to the rediscovery of wonder in our relationship with the world. The ascetic way is a way of liberation. And the ascetic is one who is free, uncontrolled by abusive attitudes and habits, characterized by self-restraint, as well as by the ability to say “no” or “enough.” The goal of asceticism is moderation, not repression; its content is positive, not negative. It looks to service, not selfishness; to reconciliation, not renunciation. Without asceticism, none of us is authentically human.

When Eastern Christians speak of asceticism and reconciliation, of sin and repentance, they do not envisage it legalistically or with a sense of guilt, but rather a radical transformation of one’s worldview and lifestyle. In his now classic article, entitled “The Roots of our Ecological Crisis,” Lynn White already suspected — although he did not elaborate on — the truth behind asceticism, noting that:

The Greek saint contemplates; the Western saint acts. The Latins … felt that sin was moral evil, and that salvation was to be found in right conduct. … The implications of Christianity for the conquest of nature would emerge more easily in the Western atmosphere.

It appears that the contemplative approach leaves a softer, gentler, lighter impact on creation. Paradoxically, then, ecological correction may in fact begin with environmental in-action. This is the discipline of asceticism: of silence, of vigilance and of detachment. It is the way of humility, of learning to tread lightly and gently on this planet. A story in The Sayings of the Desert Fathers narrates how the devil once asked a monk, who was sitting, doing nothing: “What are you doing here?” To which the monk replied: “I am doing nothing; I am simply keeping this place.” This reminds me of the divine commandment in the garden of paradise, according to which we are to “till and keep the earth” (Gen. 2.15); I prefer the translation of this phrase as “serve and preserve the earth” – which is, quite literally, what it means. You will remember that, during every Orthodox Divine Liturgy, the deacon stands in the middle of the church and exclaims: “Let us stand in goodness; let us stand in awe.” This sense of “goodness” takes me back to the beginning of it all in Genesis, when God looked upon creation and said: “Indeed, it is good, very good.” (Gen. 1.31) Before we can begin to act responsibly, we are called to stand still. The message of asceticism is: “Don’t just do something; stand there!”

Consider one example of asceticism, namely fasting. We Orthodox fast from dairy and meat products for half the year, almost as if to reconcile one half of the year with the other, secular time with the time of the kingdom. What does fasting imply? To fast is to learn not simply to give up but to offer; it is learning to share, to re-connect with human beings and the natural world. Fasting means breaking down barriers with my neighbor and my world: recognizing in others faces, icons; and in the earth the
very face of God. Ultimately, to fast is to love; it is to see clearly, to move away from what I want to what the world needs. It is to be liberated from control and compulsion, to value everything for itself and not simply for ourselves. It is to be filled with a sense of goodness, of God-li-ness: to see all things in God and God in all things.

Orthodox Practice: Three Models of Caring for the Earth

Now, if our ecological prayer is to move from the distant periphery of an abstract theology to the center stage of practical living, if Orthodox spirituality is to become “incarnate,” then there are three complementary models that are proposed – and have been tested – by the Orthodox tradition.

The Biblical Model

According to this model, the Church is called to be in solidarity with the weakest parts of the Body of Christ. It must stand for the most vulnerable, the helpless or voiceless elements of this world, which according to St. Paul “groan in travail, awaiting liberation from the children of God” (Rom. 8:22). This implies a kind of cosmic “liberation theology“:

“One member cannot say to another, ‘I have no need of you.’ On the contrary, those members that seem to be weaker are indispensible … and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect.” (1 Cor. 12:20-25)

The earth, too, is a member of our body, a part of our flesh, inseparable from our history and our destiny. In the same way the God of Israel once heard the cry of the poor and the oppressed (Ex. 3 and Jonah 4), God also hears the silent cry of the earth. This is the Biblical covenant, God’s promise to the people of Israel: God listens to the world; God attends to the world; God tends to the smallest details of this earth.

The Ascetic Model

In the second model, we might think of the three “R”s of the ascetic life: renunciation, repentance, and responsibility.

Renunciation is an ancient response – indeed, it is pre-Christian, found for example in classical Greece. It is also a universal response – indeed, it is even non-Christian; Aboriginal and Indian peoples know this very well. As we have already seen, renunciation is a way of learning to share. Therefore, it has social consequences; it reminds us to use material goods respectfully. Renunciation is about living simply and about simply living;

Repentance is a return to a God-given life “according to nature,” as the Desert Fathers would say. In repentance, we confess that we have sinned – you will recall how His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew defined the abuse of the natural environment as “sin.” Moreover, we confess that we do not share, that we are self-centered, that we in fact abuse the resources of the earth. Through repentance, we recognize that we have fallen short of our vocation “to serve and preserve the earth” (Gen. 2:15);
Responsibility is our challenge, our choice. Having renounced whatever clutters our mind and our life, and after repenting of our wastefulness, we can direct our lives in love and reverence toward creation and Creator.

The Sacramental Model
Orthodox Christians undertake this self-discipline through the sacraments, which have an undeniable and indelible environmental seal. Unfortunately, in many church circles, the sacraments are often reduced to ritual observances. Yet, communion is much more than a way of pious inspiration or individual reward. It is the imperative to share. It is crucial, then, that we recall the sacramental dimension of the world, recognizing that nothing is secular or profane. Everything is created by God and embraced by God. God is – and is within – the very constitution of our world. If God were withdrawn from the world, the world would collapse. Before Vespers each evening, Orthodox monastics recite the Ninth Hour, recalling our vocation to realize the presence of God “at every hour and every moment, both in heaven and on earth, indeed in all places of his dominion” (Ps. 103:22). Such is the depth of a sacramental worldview.

Orthodox Christians in fact prefer to speak of “mystery” rather than “sacrament,” because the latter tends to imply the acquisition of something “objective.” Traditionally, it is also said that there are seven mysteries or sacraments. Yet this categorization, too, is neither completely true nor always helpful. The Orthodox Church has never limited itself to seven sacraments, preferring to speak of every moment and aspect of life as being sacramental – from birth through death; the funeral service was once also classified as a sacrament. So the sacraments do not work in some magical manner; they function “mystically,” silently permeating the hearts and lives of those, who choose to be open to the possibility of encounter with God – much like the flow of blood in the human body, or like the flow of water in rivers.

Conclusion
We call this crisis “ecological,” which is fair in so far as its results are manifest in the ecological sphere. Yet, the crisis is not first of all about ecology. It is a crisis about us; it is a crisis about the way we envisage, the way we imagine our world. It is a spiritual battle against
– to quote Eastern Christian mystic Maximus the Confessor – “movements and powers within us, which are disordered, unnatural, and hostile to God’s creation.” We are treating our planet in an inhuman, god-forsaken manner because we perceive it this way, because we see ourselves this way. So before we can effectively deal with environmental issues, we must change our self-image. Otherwise, we are only dealing with symptoms. An eighth-century spiritual classic of the Eastern Christian Church claims: “The whole earth is a living icon of the face of God.”(St. John of Damascus) We must recall that we are less than human without God, less than human without each other, and less than human without creation.

Far too often, we are sure that we have the solutions to the environmental crisis that we face without pausing long enough, without being still to listen to the earth that we have so burdened. Far too often, we tend to pursue tangible environmental solutions like alternative energy without prior contemplation, or else we become dissatisfied when our actions are ineffective. It helps to recall that it is our very actions that led us to the predicament we face in the first place. The present ecological crisis is not simply the result of bad judgment and vice on the part of some people, of greed and covetousness on behalf of the few; it is largely a result of human effort and success, of our struggle to develop the world “for the benefit of all.” The aim is not simply to consider alternatives, whether political (such as cap-and-trade) or personal (such as carbon offsets). In some ways, as recently observed, these solutions are not unlike the medieval “indulgences,” that result neither in any radical response to the challenge at hand nor in any real change in our lifestyle; they merely create a sense of self-complacency and promote a sense of self-sufficiency.

And here, I think, lies the heart of the problem. For we are unwilling – and, in fact, violently resist any call – to adopt more simple lives. Paradoxically, ecological correction may in fact begin with environmental in-action. First, we have to stop what we are doing. What we need is a discipline of vigilant and voluntary frugality. Yet, such is the way of humility, of learning to tread lightly and gently on this planet. We know we cannot treat people like things; for each person is created “in the image of God.” It is also time we learned not to treat things like mere inanimate objects; for every-thing contains the living trace of God. Pride is a uniquely human attribute; it belongs to Adam. Humility through simplicity can reconcile a world otherwise divided by pride; it will preserve a planet otherwise exploited by greed. If we are guilty of relentless waste in our world, it may be because we have lost this spirit of simplicity and this spirituality of compassion. The challenge is: How do I live in such a way that promotes harmony and not division? How do I live in such a way that communicates gratitude and not greed? Then, we will hear the grass grow and feel the seal’s heart beat.
Notes


2. These gatherings have sought to highlight the state and fate of the world’s main bodies of water—a sacred symbol for most religions and a natural resource that covers seven-tenths of the earth’s surface. Participants at the symposia include religious leaders, scientists, policy-makers, environmentalists, activists, local communities, and media. These unique international, interfaith, and interdisciplinary gatherings promote an alliance between science and religion in a spirit of mutual respect.


