

The Divine Economy: Ecology and the Orthodox Church

by **Elizabeth Theokritoff**



Patriarch Bartholomew releases a rehabilitated kestrel on Spetses. Photo © Sean Hawkey

It was a picture-postcard Greek island scene as Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople disembarked on Spetses this June greeted by the ringing of church bells and children in traditional dress. Except, perhaps, for his 200 or so companions – not only clergy and theologians from various Churches and faiths, but also green activists and environmental scientists, economists, businessmen, academics and leaders in civil society. This remarkable array of people united by environmental concern is typical of the ship-borne environmental symposia which the “Green Patriarch”, as he is often called, has been hosting since 1995.

Why would the senior hierarch of the Orthodox Church be taking this leading role in promoting environmental awareness on the world stage? For an answer, we need to go deep into

the theology, worship and spiritual life of the Orthodox Church, with its potentially transformative vision of what Creation is and where it is going.

It is fundamental to Orthodox theology that *Creation is inseparable from salvation*. The divine economy – God’s dealings with His creatures – is a great arc stretching from the Creation of the universe to the consummation of all things, their transfiguration so that “God will be all in all”. The Incarnation is not an emergency measure to remedy human sin: in the words of St Maximus the Confessor (580-662), probably the greatest theologian of Creation in the Christian tradition, “it is the great mystery for the sake of which everything was created. It is the movement in which God assumes and thus saves material Creation;” and it is

precedented in the very act of Creation, in which the divine Word is “embodied” in the “words” or rational principles inherent in every created thing. Given human sin, the coming of Christ also restores the originally-intended relationship between man and the Earth, as depicted in the paradise narrative: the new Adam is the portal whereby God enters matter, and the material world is the vehicle through which we come to know God’s goodness.

This vision of the divine economy establishes a point vital for our ecological approach: the fundamental distinction is not between “man and nature” or “matter and spirit”, but between Creator and Creation. Creation is thus not something we “care for” – it is what *we are*. *Everything* that is not God is united in the fragility of its origins out of nothing. But also in the glory of its calling to be filled with God, for the separation from God is a paradox:¹ created things are other than God, but by the very fact of existing they participate in something proper only to Him who says “I AM”. Human “dominion” can be understood only within this solidarity in createdness, as an aspect of the interdependence of creatures who all ultimately look to God.

The work of embodiment is continued by the Church, as the

Body of Christ, through the sacraments and blessings in which matter becomes the bearer of God’s grace. This is most obvious in the Eucharist, in which fruits of the Earth shaped by human skill are offered up in thanksgiving, to be returned to us again as God’s gift of Himself. Orthodox theologians frequently point to the Eucharist as the paradigm for all our use of the world.² By seeing everything we do with the world as a thank-offering, we are relating things to their own Creator and recognising that nothing in the world is ours by right. We use things always by God’s gracious gift: “Your own of Your own we offer...” in the words of the Divine Liturgy.

The use of matter most obvious to any visitor to an Orthodox church is undoubtedly the icon. The icon affirms in the most concrete way that God has now entered into matter, and can therefore be depicted in His incarnate form. And correspondingly, it points to the iconic character of all Creation. The making of a traditional icon involves the animal, vegetable and mineral worlds, arranged so as to become what they are meant to be: a revelation of their Creator, through which we can venerate Him. And this opens our eyes, so that we turn back to “ordinary” matter and see all round us in the natural world the imprint of the same Face. Thus one of



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An ecological monastery amidst the forest: St John the Baptist, Anatoli, near Larisa in central Greece.

the most venerated of contemporary Elders, St Paisios of Mount Athos (d. 1994), could pick a blade of grass and compare it to an icon, full of divine grace.

In his sensitivity to the sanctification of the Earth and friendship with its creatures, Elder Paisios fits into a pattern repeated over and over again, from the first Christian centuries to today and from the deserts of Egypt and Palestine to the islands of Alaska. St Francis of Assisi, often depicted as a shining exception in Christian history, falls squarely within this tradition. So do many of the early British saints, widely venerated by Orthodox Christians in this country. Otters warming the feet of St Cuthbert or St Columba calming the weather by his prayers are often treated today as quaint legends on a par with tales of pixies and mermaids. For the Orthodox Christian, however, such stories exemplify a restoration of the proper order of nature round the human who has restored the divine image in him or herself.

The path to restoring the divine image in ourselves in the Orthodox tradition is an ascetic way; and not coincidentally, asceticism equally lies at the heart of the Orthodox ecological approach. Asceticism in some form is for everyone. Its most obvious manifestation is the ancient Christian discipline of fasting, according to which observant Orthodox Christians abstain from meat and animal products for about half the days of the year. The direct environmental impact of such a practice is obvious, but that is not the main point. The effect of fasting, and other ascetic practices designed to free us from slavery to our appetites, is to create a reverent distance

between ourselves and material things, so that we re-discover them in their relation to their Creator.

This transformed vision is not attained only by a few outstanding saints. It is frequently visible in monastic communities in the way they structure everyday life, so that the most ordinary uses of the world become a way to “make nature already now a partaker of the glory of the children of God, and allow it to sing praises with them”.³ Small wonder then, that in many Orthodox monasteries today this traditional model of “transfigured life” is blended seamlessly with new ecological practices and farming methods or other environmental initiatives. Monastic life has historically been the main source of Orthodox spiritual renewal, so the monastic example offers the greatest hope for an Orthodox ecological awareness that is not perceived as a “current issue”, but as an organic expression of theology and Church life.



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References:

1. See further Louth, *Introducing Eastern Orthodox Theology* (SPCK, 2013)
2. e.g. Metropolitan John of Pergamon, *Proprietors or Priests of Creation?* see <http://www.orthodoxytoday.org/articles2/MetJohnCreation.php>
3. Archimandrite Aimilianos of Simonopetra, in Golitzin, *The Living Witness of the Holy Mountain* (St Tikhon's Press, 1996; translation SPCK, 2013)