

Byzantine Thought and the Environment

In the framework of emerging ecological problems of the contemporary world, different disciplines, of both natural-scientific and social-humanistic orientation, are trying to offer their response to the increasing number of issues concerning the environment. In this intense debate, the contribution of humanistic disciplines, namely philosophy and theology, is somewhat neglected, although these offer many insightful analyses and lively discussions of our problem, especially in recent times. The main question from the viewpoint of speculative philosophy and theology is the relationship between man and nature, and God and nature. In this sense, Christian thought has often been accused of being anthropocentric, in sense of posing humans in the centre of creation and thus allowing them negligence and destruction of nature, especially in the sense of Biblical “calling” of humans to “dominate the earth”. That is why, at least in the religious sphere of the problem, thinkers turned to religions other than Christianity, especially to Buddhism and Hindu.¹ Thus Arne Næss, the author of the phrase “deep ecology” that rejects the idea of ranking beings according to their relative value, writes that the Christian idea of stewardship is arrogant and based on the superiority of human beings.² Such views have been often called strongly anti-Christian, and as promoting rigorous “ecological egalitarianism”,³ sharply criticizing the role of humans in the Christian conception of creation.

For many environmental advocates, the unacceptability of the Christian worldview lies in the Biblical narrative of Genesis, that states the creation of man in God’s image and likeness, so that human race would “rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air,

¹ For example, see Thomas Berry & Thomas Clarke, *Befriending the Earth: A Theology of Reconciliation Between Humans and the Earth*, Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1991; On “deep ecology” see Drew Christiansen, “Ecology, Justice, and Development”, *Theological Studies*, 51:1, 1990, 77-81.

² Arne Næss, *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle: Outline of an Ecosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, 187.

³ George Sessions, “The Deep Ecology Movement: A Review”, *Environmental Review*, 11, 1987, 105-125.

over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all creatures that move along the ground”.⁴ Fifty years ago, Lynn White published his article in the famous journal *Science*,⁵ and claimed that the historic roots of the environmental crisis are to be found precisely in these lines of Genesis, which inspired a materialist Western view towards nature.

On the other hand, some have argued that such an exploitative perspective on creation might indeed be Western, but not entirely Christian, pointing out how the social, economic, political, as well as philosophical conditions were rather different in the East and the West during Middle Ages. While, the argument goes, Latin faith might be considered as voluntaristic, while the Greek, i.e., Byzantine, faith was intellectualist, and while the Westerners considered nature as a domain of action, the Greeks saw it in a more symbolic, moral, or even mystical manner.⁶

This symbolic and mystical perspective, as the basis of Greco-Byzantine dimension of Christianity, is often neglected even in discussions on philosophy in general, or more specifically on ethics, aesthetics, and other disciplines, let alone on philosophy of the environment. Thus, I will briefly, as far as the time allows, offer a few points and insights coming from Byzantine thought that might be of interest in ecological debates.

First of all, the understanding of the relationship of God and nature varies between two extremities – the deism which would presuppose an absolute transcendence of the divinity, and the pantheism which identifies the Creator in creation. These two poles are found also in the Christian thought, since God is in the same time transcendent and immanent in the world. The problem that arises is how these two can be reconciled? Maximus the Confessor, a prominent 7th century intellectual figure, responds by formulating the doctrine of *logoi*, which are “predeterminations” that pre-exist “in God, in accordance with which all things are and have become and abide”.⁷ These are, therefore, God’s original ideas or intentions for creation; a thing’s being is determined by its *logos*, i.e., by what God intends it to be. God is in everything that exists because everything is a realization of his *logoi*, his

⁴ Gen. 1.26.

⁵ Lynn White, “The Roots of Our Ecological Crisis”, *Science*, 155, 1967, 1203-1207.

⁶ Manussos Marangudakis, “The Medieval Roots of Our Environmental Crisis”, *Environmental Ethics*, 23:2, 2001, 243-260.

⁷ *Amb.* 42, 1329 AB.

creative will, and that is to say that to partake in existence is to partake in God, in the creative will of him who is existence itself.⁸ However, *logoi* do not exist in God in a proper sense, but they subsist as potencies in him. In this way Maximus affirms both God's transcendence and his immanence in the world, not falling into deism or pantheism. However, Adam's fall corrupted the *logoi* of the entire universe, which thus became a fallen world full of imbalances. The task, therefore, is to conduct a way of life that would restore order in creation, and put it in conformity with the eternal *logoi*. In order to better explain this, Maximus introduces the concept of *tropos*, i.e., τρόπος ὑπάρξεως, which is a mode of existence. So, "the result of the Fall is not that natures are distorted in themselves, but rather that natures are misused: the Fall exists at the level not of *logos*, but of *tropos*".⁹ The solution stands in man adjusting his *tropos* to his *logos*, that is, conducting his life, his mode of existence in accordance with the eternal *logos* of his being. In the sense of the relationship with creation, what Maximus implies is that it is our *tropos* is a *tropos* of abuse of creation.¹⁰

This has several important implications: from an ethical point of view, it directs man towards the just and proper relationship to nature/creation; on the other hand, it affirms the goodness of nature, since it states the presence of God in nature, given the presence of Logos in all creation through *logoi*. The doctrine of *logoi* also affirms the importance of Christian theology and philosophy in the ecological debate in which the primary interest has been directed to process philosophy and ancient religions of the Earth. Furthermore, this means that everything was created with a specific plan, and out of God's will; thus, changing this plan, abusing the nature and creating environmental disaster is opposed to God's will and His plan.¹¹

A crucial part of Maximus' thought is the famous doctrine of man as microcosm and mediator, whose task is to reconcile five mediations existing in cosmos: male-female;

⁸ Elizabeth Theokritoff, *Living in God's Creation: Orthodox Perspectives on Ecology*, Crestwood: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2009, 54.

⁹ Andrew Louth, *Maximus the Confessor*, London: Routledge, 1996, 57.

¹⁰ Alan Riou, *Le monde et l'Église selon Maxime le Confesseur*, Paris: Beauchesne, 1973, 70.

¹¹ See Radu Bordeianu, "Maximus and Ecology: The Relevance of Maximus the Confessor's Theology of Creation for the Present Ecological Crisis", *The Downside Review*, 127, 2009, 106-107.

paradise-inhabited world; heaven-earth; sensible-intelligible; God-creation. The microcosm realizes a union between humans and nonhumans that enacts the final union of God and the world.¹² Human person embraces and holds together the alienated world, and this is “the way to fulfillment for what is divided”. Through practical and contemplative ascetic struggle, humanity “unites paradise and the inhabited world to make one earth”, overcoming all the alienations of the cosmos, until it finally “unites the created nature with the uncreated”.¹³ As Maximus put it:

Humanity clearly has the power of naturally uniting at the mean point of each division since it is related to the extremities of each division in its own parts... For this very reason the human being was introduced last among beings as a kind of natural bond mediating between the extremities of universals through their proper parts, and leading into unity in itself those things that are naturally set apart from one another by a great interval.¹⁴

Another important thinker of the early Byzantine era, Dionysius Pseudo-Areopagite, who greatly influenced Maximus the Confessor, famous for his blend of Neoplatonism and Christianity, as well as for having coined the term hierarchy, was especially eloquent on two themes that heavily marked the history of philosophy, namely love and beauty. According to his highly aestheticized thought, the entire world is beautiful. Beauty, form, and order,¹⁵ three terms that Dionysius hold very dearly, together with another three, harmony, friendship, and community,¹⁶ describe the wisely created cosmos and all things in it:

¹² A classical and most exhaustive work on Maximus’ anthropology is Lars Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator: The Theological Anthropology of Maximus the Confessor*, Chicago: Open Court, 1995. On this and various issues in Maximus, see also Torstein Tollefsen, *The Christocentric Cosmology of St Maximus the Confessor*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, esp. 64-190.

¹³ *Amb. 41*, 1308B.

¹⁴ *Amb. 41*, 1307B.

¹⁵ DN IV.27, 728D

¹⁶ DN IV.7, 704A.

Still, as I have said already, we must learn about Wisdom from all things. As Scripture says, Wisdom has made and continues always to adapt everything. It is the cause of unbreakable accommodation and order of all things and it is forever linking the goals of one set of things with the sources of another and in this fashion it makes a thing of beauty of the unity and the harmony of the whole.¹⁷

The end of what comes before is tied with the beginning of what comes after, so that the world appears arranged according to beauty and ordered in a harmonious way. All this is possible because the order comes from beauty, i.e., from its source, and so the order itself represents a reflection of that beauty.¹⁸ In a quite Platonic way, Dionysius is keen on pairing the Beautiful with the Good, as well as linking it to love, and stating that “so it is that all things must desire, must yearn for, must love, the Beautiful and the Good”.¹⁹ In saying “all things”, Dionysius literally means it, including animals, as well as stones. This yearning, eros, is categorized into four types: ἔρως ἐπιστρεπτικός, which goes from inferiors to superiors, by way of return (conversion), ἔρως κοινωνικός, which represents the relationship between equals, by way of communion, ἔρως προνοητικός, which goes from superiors to inferiors, by way of providence, and ἔρως συνεκτικός, which is the love of each being for itself, by way of conservation. These types of eros form, however, a unified circle of love:

Divine yearning shows especially its unbeginning and unending nature traveling in an endless circle through the Good, from the Good, in the Good and to the Good, unerringly turning, ever on the same center, ever in the same direction, always proceeding, always remaining, always being restored to itself.²⁰

¹⁷ DN VII.3, 872B.

¹⁸ Filip Ivanovic, “Images of Invisible Beauty in the Aesthetic Cosmology of Dionysius the Areopagite”, in: J. Bogdanovic (ed.), *Perceptions of the Body and Sacred Space in Late Antiquity and Byzantium*, London: Routledge, 2018, 11-22.

¹⁹ DN IV.10, 708A.

²⁰ DN IV.14, 712D-713A.

The eternal circle is, then, love as both procession and return, it is God who is present in all things and who gives them their goodness, beauty, power, and being. Love is thus identified as power, manifestation, procession and erotic movement which preexists in the Good, goes out of the Good, and circularly moves therefrom towards beings, and then, in reversion, returns to the Good. Most importantly for our topic, it refers to the entire creation, and not just human beings.

This unity of creation, and the bond between human being and the rest of nature is stressed by John of Damascus, an 8th century theologian, famous, among other things, for his defense of icons, who writes that human being shares community with both animate and inanimate things:

For the bond of union between man and inanimate things is the body and its composition out of the four elements: and the bond between man and plants consists, in addition to these things, of their powers of nourishment and growth and seeding, that is, generation: and finally, over and above these links, man is connected with unreasoning animals by appetite, that is anger and desire, and sense and impulsive movement.²¹

Even more concrete, for example, is John Chrysostom, 4th century archbishop of Constantinople, who argues for the intrinsic goodness of all creation, including “not only plants that are useful but also those that are harmful, and not only the trees that bear fruit but also those that bear none; and not only tame animals but also wild and unruly ones”.²²

Finally, some exemplary ideas that we have discussed so far, such as the unity of creation, beauty of cosmos, all-encompassing love, and man as microcosm and mediator, show the vast richness of Byzantine philosophical and theological inheritance that can be relevant for our environmental concerns today. It also contributes to amending the unjustified avoidance of exploring Christian cosmology, anthropology, ethics, and aesthetics in the contemporary ecological debates. Instead of an exploitative view of nature in Latin medieval culture, or the radical, often unsound, egalitarianism of the deep ecology

²¹ *Exp.*, II.12

²² *Hom.*, X.11.

movement, the Greco-Byzantine thought would offer valuable and valid considerations that affirm the importance of the created world, and that do not downplay humankind's place in the creation by insisting on ecological egalitarianism and anti-anthropocentrism, thus often falling into misanthropy, but that rather emphasize humankind's crucial and decisive responsibility for the well-being of all life.

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