



“The Contribution of Eastern Christendom to the Development of a Theology of the Environment”

PAUL MICHAEL HAFFNER

Given online for St Mary's Texas, 30 March 2022

THE CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY OF CREATION contributes to the solution of the ecological crisis, affirming the fundamental truth that visible creation is itself a divine gift, the ‘original gift,’ which creates a ‘space’ for personal communion. Effectively, a correct Christian ecological theology is found in the application of theology to creation. The term ‘ecology’ combines the two Greek words, ‘οἶκος’ (house) and ‘λόγος’ (word): the physical environment of human existence could be seen as a sort of ‘habitation’ for human life. Considering that the interior life of the Holy Trinity is a life of communion, the divine act of creation is the totally free production of partners who can share in that communion. In this way, it can be said that the divine communion has now found its ‘habitation’ in the created cosmos. For this reason, it is possible to speak of the cosmos as a space of encounter for personal communion.¹ Pope Francis remarked in his recent encyclical (*Laudato Si*) on the environment:

The Father is the ultimate source of everything, the loving and self-communicating foundation of all that exists. The Son, his reflection, through whom all things were created, united himself to this earth when he was formed in the womb of Mary. The Spirit, infinite bond of love, is intimately present at the very heart of the universe, inspiring and bringing new pathways.²

In the foreword to *Laudato Si*, the Holy Father singled out the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew for special mention for having enriched the Church’s thinking on ecological questions, hence our attempt to depict the theology of Eastern Christendom in this paper.³ Patriarch Bartholomew

¹ International Theological Commission, *Communion and Stewardship: Human Persons Created in the Image of God* (July 23, 2004), 74.

² Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si*, 238. The Encyclical *Laudato Si* of Pope Francis takes its name from the invocation of Saint Francis of Assisi, “Praise be to you, my Lord” which in the *Canticle of the Creatures* reminds us that the earth, our common home “is like a sister with whom we share our life and a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us”. (§2) Each chapter addresses a particular topic using a specific method, but throughout the entire Encyclical, some principal concepts are continually taken up and enriched:

- the intimate relationship between the poor and the fragility of the planet,
- the conviction that everything in the world is connected,
- the critique of new paradigms and forms of power derived from technology,
- the call to seek other ways of understanding the economy and progress,
- the value proper to each creature,
- the human meaning of ecology,
- the need for forthright and honest debate,
- the serious responsibility of international and local policy,
- the throwaway culture and the proposal of a new lifestyle. (§16)

The dialogical method that Pope Francis proposes for addressing and resolving the environmental problems is followed throughout the Encyclical. It refers to contributions by philosophers and theologians, not only Catholic but also Orthodox (like Patriarch Bartholomew). In the end we find ourselves before the infinite beauty of God: “Eternal life will be a shared experience of awe, in which each creature, resplendently transfigured, will take its rightful place and have something to give those poor men and women who will have been liberated once and for all.” §243 See also *L’Osservatore Romano* (weekly English edition), 19 June 2015, p. 9.

³ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*, 7–9.

highlighted that as Christians, we are also called “to accept the world as a sacrament of communion, as a way of sharing with God and our neighbours on a global scale. It is our humble conviction that the divine and the human meet in the slightest detail in the seamless garment of God’s creation, in the last speck of dust of our planet”.⁴

Clearly theology will not be able to provide a technical solution to the environmental crisis;⁵ nonetheless, maybe it can help us view our natural environment as God sees it, as the place of personal communion in which human beings, created in the image of God, must seek reciprocal communion and the final perfection of the visible universe.⁶ The Christian view of creation is of fundamental importance for the Christian foundation of a new responsibility toward the environment. Philosophical realism also has its place in considering the theology of the environment. Realism is an instrument of dialogue between science and faith.⁷ Realism and theological language are necessary for us to develop a correct understanding of the environment. It is important to consider the cosmos from the scientific, philosophical and theological points of view, seeing its relationship with anthropology and thus avoiding the error of cosmocentrism. The realist perspective is also necessary to establish the basis for moral action with respect to the environment.

1. The Patristic era

Theological interest in creation, unlike secular concern, did not just begin in the 1960s! In Christian antiquity, the fourth Pope, Clement of Rome (37–101) is the author of the *Epistle to the Corinthians* which was considered part of the canon of Scripture in Egypt and Syria for several centuries. His emphasis regarding creation is that there is no separation in the law of God: the law which governs the heavens is the same law which governs the oceans and winds and all parts of creation. He provides artistic descriptions of a world in harmony with itself and the Creator. The legacy of Clement is that he demonstrates that teachings about creation have been part of Christianity from its beginning in the first century:

Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter succeed one another peaceably; the winds fulfil their punctual duties, each from its own quarter, and give no offence; the ever-flowing streams... and even the minutest of living creatures mingle together in peaceful accord. Upon all of these the Great Architect and Lord of the universe has enjoined peace and harmony, for the good of all alike, and pre-eminently for the good of ourselves who have sought refuge in His mercies through our Lord Jesus Christ.⁸

An early theologian, St. Irenaeus of Lyons (129–203) links creation, the dignity of the human person and the Holy Eucharist in a Christological key:

For the glory of God is a living man; and the life of man consists in beholding God. For if the manifestation of God, which is made by means of the creation, affords life to all living in the earth, much more does that revelation of the Father which comes through the Word, give life to those who seek God... And as we are His members, we are also nourished by means of the creation (and He Himself grants the creation to us, for He causes His sun to rise, and sends rain when He wills). He has acknowledged the cup (which is part of the creation) as His own Blood,

⁴ Patriarch Bartholomew, “Global Responsibility and Ecological Sustainability”, Closing Remarks, Halki Summit I, Istanbul (20 June 2012).

⁵ Cf. Vatican II, *Gaudium et spes*, 33.2, the Church does not have ready answers to every question.

⁶ Cf. Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*, 78.

⁷ Cf. P. Haffner, *The Mystery of Reason* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2001), pp.12–19.

⁸ Pope Clement I, *Letter to the Corinthians* 1:21.

from which He bedews our blood; and the bread (also a part of the creation) He has established as His own Body, from which He gives increase to our bodies.⁹

Eminent theologian of the early Church, Origen (184–253) was born in Alexandria, and became a brilliant philosopher and biblical exegete by the age of eighteen. Like most early Christians, much of his writing is based upon inspired knowledge and experience of Christ. He often uses creation as a fertile field for insight into the divine nature, and says that everything in creation represents some aspect of the nature of God.

The world in all its diversity and varying conditions is composed not only of rational and diviner natures, but of dumb animals, wild and tame beasts, of birds and of all the things which live in the waters... Seeing there is so great a variety in the world, and so great a diversity among rational beings themselves, what cause ought to be assigned for the existence of the world? But God, by ineffable skill of His wisdom, transforming and restoring all things, recalls those very creatures which differed so much from each other in mental conformation to one agreement of labour and purpose, so that although they are under the influence of different motives, they nevertheless complete the fullness and perfection of one world, and the very variety of minds tends to one end of perfection.¹⁰

Bishop of Alexandria and defender of orthodoxy, St. Athanasius (297–373) entered into many dialogues to articulate and preserve an authentic Christian understanding of Church doctrine. He frequently used lessons from nature to exemplify his instruction and his writings are filled with a sense of creation as a primary instructor of Christian life.

By the greatness and the beauty of the creatures proportionately the Maker of them is seen. For just as by looking up to the heaven and seeing its order and the light of the stars, it is possible to infer the Word Who ordered these things, so by beholding the Word of God, one needs must behold also God His Father, proceeding from Whom He is rightly called His Father's Interpreter and Messenger. And this one may see from our own experience; for if when a word proceeds from men we infer that the mind is its source, and by thinking about the word, we see with our reason the mind which it reveals, by far greater evidence and incomparably more, seeing the power of the Word, we receive knowledge also of His good Father, as the Saviour Himself says, "He that has seen Me, has seen the Father."¹¹

As a young man, St. Ephraim the Syrian (306–373) appeared dull and uninspired. After his conversion and baptism, a profound change took place in his attitude and numerous mental and spiritual gifts flowered which allowed him to unravel difficult philosophical and metaphysical complexities. When Ephraem was confronted by theological adversaries, he appealed to their hearts rather than to their minds: he expresses himself in visionary, apocalyptic, symbolic and especially poetical forms. His writings convey a unique blend of mystical experience with perceptions about the natural world.

The keys of doctrine which unlock all of Scripture's books,
have opened up before my eyes the book of creation.
The treasure house of the Ark, the crown of the Law,
this is a book which above its companions has in its narrative
made the Creator perceptible and transmitted his actions;
It has envisioned all His craftsmanship,
made manifest His works of art.¹²

⁹ St. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 4:20.7 and 5:2.2.

¹⁰ Origen, *De Principiis*, Book II:1–3.

¹¹ St. Athanasius, *Against the Heathen* 45:1–2.

¹² St. Ephraem, *Hymns of Paradise*, Hymn VI.

Hilary of Poitiers (315–367) is the most important Father of Roman Gaul, sometimes called the Athanasius of the West, for his defence of the true faith against the Arians. The heart of his theology is the uniqueness of Christianity among all the religions of the world because it manifests the highest intuitions of God into the physical world and because it teaches us how to know God by following the example and path of Jesus Christ:

Therefore, ... by the greatness of His works and the beauty of the things that He has made the Creator of worlds is rightly discerned. The Creator of great things is supreme in greatness, of beautiful things in beauty. Since the work transcends our thoughts, all thought must be transcended by the Maker. Thus heaven and air and earth and seas are fair: fair also the whole universe, as the Greeks agree, who from its beautiful ordering call it *kosmos*, that is, order.

But if our thought can estimate this beauty of the universe by a natural instinct—an instinct such as we see in certain birds and beasts whose voice, though it fall below the level of our understanding, yet has a sense clear to them though they cannot utter it, and in which, since all speech is the expression of some thought, there lies a meaning patent to themselves—must not the Lord of this universal beauty be recognized as Himself most beautiful amid all the beauty that surrounds Him? For though the splendour of His eternal glory overtax our mind's best powers, it cannot fail to see that He is beautiful.¹³

One of the Eastern Fathers, St. Cyril of Jerusalem (315–386) and author of a series of lectures on the Christian sacraments and instructions for catechumens, was once persecuted by the Arians for selling church property to feed the poor. He attended the Council of Constantinople and helped develop the Nicene Creed and the concept of “ὁμοούσιος” which identifies the unity inherent in Christ's spiritual-physical nature. His writings about creation are characterized by their emphasis upon physical nature as a window into the Divine Nature.

For what fault have they (the heretics and pagans) to find with the vast harmony of God? They who ought to have been struck with amazement on beholding the vaultings of the heavens: they, who ought to have worshipped Him Who reared the sky as a dome, Who formed the stable substance of heaven... Is there not cause to wonder when one looks at the constitution of the sun? ... See also how the days alternately respond each to the other in due order in summer increasing and in winter decreasing ... For the heretics who have no ears, they all but cry aloud, and by their good order say, that there is none other God save the Creator who has set them their bounds, and laid out the order of the Universe.¹⁴

A founder of Eastern communal monastic life, and the first of the Cappadocian Fathers, St. Basil the Great (329–379) describes the handiwork of the Creator as “everywhere in creation” and probes deeply into the reasons for creation's structure. He lays out a Christian cosmology that goes beyond spatial limitations, that remains orderly and intentional, and that is filled with an intelligible hierarchy beyond human comprehension. This marvellous creation he calls the “supreme icon” of Christian faith which leads to knowledge of the “Supreme Artisan.” His lessons from the bees are a beautiful example of his theology of creation:

Listen, Christians, you to whom it is forbidden to “recompense evil for evil” and who are commanded “to overcome evil with good.” Take the bee for your model, which constructs its cells without injuring anyone and without interfering with the goods of others. It gathers openly pollen from the flowers, drawing in the basis for the honey scattered over them like dew, and injects it into the hollow of its cells. At first this honey is liquid; time thickens it and gives it its sweetness. The Book of Proverbs has given the bee the most honourable and the best praise by calling her wise and industrious. How much activity she exerts in gathering this precious

¹³ St. Hilary, *On the Holy Trinity*, Book I, 7.

¹⁴ St. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures*, IX:5–6.

nourishment, by which both kings and men of low degree are brought to health! How great is the art and cunning she displays in the construction of the storehouses which are destined to receive the honey? After having spread the pollen like a thin membrane, she distributes it in contiguous compartments which, weak though they are, by their number and by their mass, sustain the whole edifice. Each cell in fact holds to the one next to it, and is separated by one upon another. The bee takes care not to make one vast cavity, for fear it might break under the weight of the liquid, and allow it to escape. See how the discoveries of geometry are mere by-works to the wise bee!¹⁵

Importantly, St. Basil makes an observation concerning the earth as a common inheritance:

God has poured the rains on a land tilled by avaricious hands; He has given the sun to keep the seeds warm, and to multiply the fruit through His productivity. Things of this kind are from God: the fertile land, moderate winds, abundance of seeds, the work of the oxen, and other things by which a farm is brought into productivity and abundance... But the avaricious one has not remembered our common nature and has not thought of distribution.¹⁶

A profound writer, St. Gregory Nazianzen (329–389) has been uniquely honoured as the only Greek father with the special title, “the theologian”. He is known as one of the three Cappadocian Fathers, one of the four Eastern doctors of the Church, and one of those especially responsible for the defeat of the Arian heresy. He loved solitude and was easily dismayed by the strife and conflict of the world. Even though he sought a quiet, simple life, circumstances combined with his brilliant oratorical skills continually called him out of seclusion into positions of leadership. He sees all of creation as recapitulated within the microcosm of the human person, not just because both are creatures of God, but because of the manner in which the individual carries the image of God and undergoes the process of *θέωσις*:

This man God set upon the earth as a kind of second world, a microcosm; ... He was king of all upon the earth, but a subject of heaven; earthly and heavenly, transient yet immortal; belonging both to the visible and to the intelligible order...; combining in the same being spirit and flesh... Thus he is a living creature under God’s Providence here, while in transition to another state and ... in process of deification (*θέωσις*) by reason of his natural tendency toward God.¹⁷

St. Gregory Nazianzen also had a profound awareness of the place of the animals within God’s creation and how they reflected their Maker in some ways:

¹⁵ St. Basil, *Hexaemeron* VIII, “The Creation of Fowl and Water Animals,” 4.

¹⁶ St. Basil, *Sermon IV:1, On Ownership*.

¹⁷ St. Gregory Nazianzen, *Orations* 45:8. St. Peter writes in his second letter we have become “partakers of divine nature.” (2 Pt 1:4) St. Athanasius of Alexandria elaborates on this beautifully by saying: “The Son of God became man, that we might become god” (*De Incarnatione*, I) [the second g is always lowercase since man can never become God substantially] indicates the concept beautifully. What would otherwise seem absurd, that fallen, sinful man may become holy as God is holy, has been made possible through Jesus Christ, who is God incarnate. Naturally, the crucial Christian assertion, that God is One, sets an absolute limit on the meaning of *θέωσις* — it is not possible for any created being to become God ontologically. Through *θεωρίᾳ*, the knowledge of God in Jesus Christ, human beings come to know and experience what it means to be fully human (the created image of God); Jesus Christ God shares Himself through *κοινωνία* with the human race, in order to conform them to all that God is in knowledge, righteousness and holiness. Theosis also asserts the complete restoration of all people, and of the entire creation, in principle. This is built upon the understanding of the atonement put forward by Irenaeus of Lyons, called “recapitulation.” For many Fathers, *θέωσις* goes beyond simply restoring people to their state before the Fall of Adam and Eve, teaching that because Christ united the human and divine natures in His Person, it is now possible for someone to enjoy closer fellowship with God than Adam and Eve initially experienced in the Garden of Eden, and that people can become more like God than Adam and Eve were at that time. Some Orthodox theologians (like Scotus did in the West), propose that the Word would have become incarnate for this reason alone, even if Adam and Eve had never sinned. For a simply summary of theosis see also G. Kapsanes, *Theosis: The True Purpose of Human Life* (Mount Athos: Holy Monastery of St Gregory, 2006).

Who among men knows all the names of the wild beasts? Or who can accurately discern the physiology of each? But if of the wild beasts we know not even their names, how shall we comprehend the Maker of them? God's command was but one which said, "Let the earth bring forth wild beasts, and cattle, and creeping things, after their kinds" (Gen 1:24), and from one earth and from one command have sprung diverse natures, the gentle sheep and the carnivorous lion, and the various instincts of irrational animals, bearing resemblance to the various characters within men; the fox to manifest the craft that is in men, and the snake the venomous treachery of friends, and the neighing horse the wantonness of young men, and the laborious ant to arouse the sluggish and the dull: for when a man passes his youth in idleness, then he is instructed by the irrational animals, being reproved by the divine Scripture saying, "Go to the ant, you sluggard, see and emulate her ways, and become wiser than she" (Pro 6:6). For when you see her treasuring up her food, imitate her and treasure up for yourself fruits of good works for the world to come... Is not the Artificer worthy the rather to be glorified? For what? If you know not the nature of all things, do the things which have been made then become useless? Can you know the efficacy of all herbs? Or can you learn the benefits which derive from every animal? Even from venomous adders have come antidotes for the preservation of men. But you will say to me, "the poisonous snake is terrible." Fear you the Lord and it will not be able to hurt you. "A scorpion stings." Fear the Lord and it shall not sting you. "A lion is blood-thirsty." Fear the Lord, and he shall lie down beside you, as by Daniel. But truly wonderful also is the action of the animals: how some, as the scorpion, have the sharpness of a sting; and others have power in their teeth; and others do battle with their claws; while the basilisk's power is his gaze. So then from this varied workmanship, understand the Creator's power.¹⁸

A brother of St. Basil, a monk and eventually a bishop, St. Gregory of Nyssa (330–395) served in the remote and obscure diocese of Nyssa near the Armenian border. There he composed inspired works on the ascetical life and the true Church of Christ. He describes human purpose as one of consecrating, even as transfiguring, creation into its full cosmological potential. Gregory, an ardent student of Origen, is the first person to use the term, "the eternal now," to describe our experience of God creating the cosmos with the human at the centre. He ardently affirms the spiritual value and beauty of nature and all things of this earth even though they reside in a subordinate position to the kingdom of God:

Now all things were already arrived at their own end: the heaven and the earth were finished, and all things that lie between them, and the particular things were adorned with their appropriate beauty; the heaven with the rays of the stars, the sea and air with the living creatures that swim and fly, and the earth with all varieties of plants and animals, to all which, empowered by the Divine will, it gave birth together; the earth was full, too, of her produce, bringing forth fruits at the same time with flowers; the meadows were full of all that grows therein, and all the mountain ridges, and summits, and every hillside, and slope, and hollow, were crowned with young grass, and with the varied produce of the trees, just risen from the ground, yet shot up at once into their perfect beauty; and all the beasts that had come into life at God's command were rejoicing, we may suppose, and skipping about, running to and fro in the thickets in herds according to their kind, while every sheltered and shady spot was ringing with the chants of the songbirds. And at sea, we may suppose, the sight to be seen was of the like kind, as it had just settled to quiet and calm in the gathering together of its depths, where havens and harbours spontaneously hollowed out on the coasts made the sea reconciled with the land; and the gentle motion of the waves vied in beauty with the meadows, rippling delicately with light and harmless breezes that skimmed the surface; and all the wealth of creation by land and sea was ready, and none was there to share it.¹⁹

Gregory illustrates the regal nature of the human person, and the responsibility which that carries:

¹⁸ St. Gregory Nazianzen, *Catechetical Lectures*, IX:13–14.

¹⁹ St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*, I, 5.

For as in our own life artificers fashion a tool in the way suitable to its use, so the best Artificer made our nature as it were a formation fit for the exercise of royalty, preparing it at once by superior advantages of soul, and by the very form of the body, to be such as to be adapted for royalty: for the soul immediately shows its royal and exalted character, far removed as it is from the lowliness of private station, in that it owns no lord, and is self-governed, swayed autocratically by its own will; for to whom else does this belong than to a king? And further, besides these facts, the fact that it is the image of that Nature which rules over all means nothing else than this, that our nature was created to be royal from the first. For as, in men's ordinary use, those who make images of princes both mould the figure of their form, and represent along with this the royal rank by the vesture of purple, and even the likeness is commonly spoken of as a king, so the human nature also, as it was made to rule the rest, was, by its likeness to the King of all, made as it were a living image, partaking with the archetype both in rank and in name, not vested in purple, nor giving indication of its rank by sceptre and diadem (for the archetype itself is not arrayed with these), but instead of the purple robe, clothed in virtue, which is in truth the most royal of all raiment, and in place of the sceptre, leaning on the bliss of immortality, and instead of the royal diadem, decked with the crown of righteousness; so that it is shown to be perfectly like to the beauty of its archetype in all that belongs to the dignity of royalty.²⁰

St. Nilus of Ankyra (365?–430) was a desert-dwelling monastic abbot and saint who was born near Constantinople and who wrote lucidly on the ascetical life. His contribution to modern ecological understanding lies in his ability to articulate the intricacies of the spiritual-mental struggle which brings the soul to know the fullness of creation as an interior spiritual experience as well as an exterior intellectual understanding. This knowledge is important today as it forms the basis for addressing over-consumption and the consumer mentality:

We should remain within the limits imposed by our basic needs and strive with all our power not to exceed them. For once we are carried a little beyond these limits in our desire for the pleasures of life, there is then no criterion by which to check our onward movement, since no bounds can be set to that which exceeds the necessary... Once a man has passed beyond the limits of his natural needs, as he grows more materialistic, he wants to put jam on his bread; and to water he adds a modicum of wine required for his health, and then the most expensive vintages. He does not rest content with essential clothing.²¹

Creation itself, furthermore, is already a first modulation of the Word of God. In a certain analogous and limited sense, creation is a 'sacrament,' a sign and efficacious means, of God's Self-revelation and His gift of Himself. In creation, God manifests Himself in a mediated way. It is necessary to make these clear distinctions in order to avoid ontologism and other steps toward pantheism. A distinction must be made between natural and supernatural revelation. Theodoret, Bishop of Cyrrhus in Syria (393–c.466), highlighted the unity and difference between God's revelation in nature and in His Son made flesh:

The Incarnation of our Savior represents the greatest fulfillment of divine solicitude toward man. In fact, neither heaven nor earth nor sea nor sky nor sun nor moon nor stars nor the entire visible and invisible universe, created by His word alone or rather brought to light by His word in accordance with His will, indicate His incommensurable goodness so much as the fact that the Only Begotten Son, He Who subsists in God's nature, reflection of His glory, imprint of His substance, Who was in the beginning, was with God and was God, through Whom all things were made, after having taken on Himself the nature of a servant, appeared in human form, by

²⁰ *Ibid.*, IV, 1.

²¹ St. Nilus of Ankyra, *Ascetic Discourses*.

his human form was considered man, was seen on earth, interacted with men, bore the burden of our weaknesses and took upon Himself our illnesses.²²

St. Proclus, Bishop of Constantinople (370?–446) is the most vivid of the Patristic homilists in his description of the participation of all of creation at the Theophany:

Christ has appeared to the world, and having adorned the unadorned world, he filled it with radiant joy. He took upon him the sin of the world and overthrew the enemy of the world. He sanctified the fountains of the waters, and enlightened people's souls. Miracles were joined to greater miracles. For today the earth and the sea share in the grace of the Saviour, and the whole world has been filled with joy. And the feast of today points to the increase in the miracles, greater than the preceding feast. For in the preceding feast of the Nativity of the Saviour the earth rejoiced, because it was bearing in the manger the Lord of all; but in today's feast of the Epiphany of God the sea is extremely glad, and it rejoices because it partakes, through the river Jordan, of the blessings of sanctification ... There he was bound in the bonds of swaddling-clothes, here he unbinds the bonds of our sins. There the King put on the purple robe of the body, here the Source puts on the river.²³

One of the greatest Fathers of the Church, St. Maximus the Confessor (580–662) represents the summit and synthesis of early Christianity thought on creation. The hierarchy of the Universe according to St. Maximus is of completely different character to that of Origen and the neoplatonics. Unlike the Origenists whose teaching inevitably disregards the lower elements of the hierarchy, no creature is deemed useless or worthy of disregard in the teaching of St. Maximus. The universal goal and purpose of man is manifested even in his nature. St. Maximus defines human nature as a "microcosm".²⁴ In his *Mystagogia* St. Maximus draws an analogy between the world of „visible and invisible creatures" and human being. "Man consisting of body and soul" is called a "world". The human person is considered as a bridge between the material and spiritual worlds, as a hierarchical centre of the created universe.

The human person according to St. Maximus was initially created with two *logoi* which dominate in the soul and in the body.²⁵ It is due to this duality that Adam was introduced into the world as a "sort of a natural link (συνδεσμός τις φυσικός),²⁶ mediating (μεσιτεύων) by his different parts between all the extremities",²⁷ including those of material and intelligible worlds. It is due to this role of the mediator (μεσίτης), the binder of the extremities of the dual world, a kind of a workshop where the unity is forged (τι τῶν ὅλων συνεκτικώτατον ἐργαστήριον),²⁸ that Adam was the last to be created out of all rational and irrational beings. Thus man being integrated into the cosmic hierarchy had been from the very start assigned by the Creator to occupy ontologically central position in the Universe. His "soul is in the middle position between God and matter and possesses the power that connects it to One and to another".²⁹

Original sin is explained as the distortion of hierarchy in the consciousness of intelligent creatures, in the perception and will of Adam. Initially God's plan was for Adam to be in a

²² Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *Discourses on Divine Providence*, 10.

²³ St. Proclus, Bishop of Constantinople, *Homilies on the Life of Christ*, 7.1, 125.

²⁴ St Maximus the Confessor, *Epistolae VI*, in: PG 91, 429.

²⁵ St Maximus the Confessor, *Quaestiones et Dubia*, in *Corpus Christianorum. Series Graeca* (Vol. 10, Edidit Jose H. Declerck, Brepols-Turnhout: Leuven University Press, 1982), q. 18.

²⁶ St Maximus the Confessor, *Ambiguorum Liber* in PG 91, 1305 B.

²⁷ See *ibid.*, 1304B. The human person is in between all oppositions (τοῖς καθόλου ... μεσιτεύον ἄκροις). Five oppositions (διαπρέσεις) are mentioned (see *ibid.*, 1304D–1305B): between created and uncreated; intelligible and physical; heaven and earth; paradise and the world; male and female. See also *Quaestiones ad Thalassium*, 48, in PG 90, 436A–B. In *Quaestiones ad Thalassium*, 60 a different set of oppositions is given.

²⁸ St Maximus the Confessor, *Ambiguorum Liber* in PG 91, 1305 B.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 1193.

progressive motion along the hierarchical ladder of existence. The Fall perverted the order of the hierarchy in the conscience and cognition process and led to catastrophe for the entire cosmos: "In the beginning the human person was created in order to climb through the loving aspiration to the Cause, and only afterwards come down to the creation ... and having acquired knowledge was to derive their origin from the Creator; but man did not do so, but has leaned down to matter".³⁰ Man who "has received as his lot dominion over the whole world, by a misuse of this great gift (...) submitted himself and the whole world to the reign of mutability and death".³¹

Christ becomes the new Adam in order to restore the broken harmony and hierarchy of existing beings: "In order to save the perishing man and having united (ένώσας) (...) the gaps of the whole creation (...) to fulfill the great council of God the Father, having placed Himself at the head of all (ἀνακεφαλαιώσας)".³² According to the thought of St. Maximus, starting from Christ Himself the harmony of existing beings spreads over the whole humankind and the whole universe. In fact, Christ alone has fulfilled the God's plan about human nature and person. It is only Him who „preserved in Himself the God's goal (σκοπόν)".³³ The body of the incarnated Lord became a spring of the water of knowledge (τό τῆς γνώσεως ὕδωρ).³⁴ The flesh of Christ is "coloured (πεπουικιμένον) by godly virtues"³⁵ and it is life-giving (ζωοποιός)³⁶ for the all humankind. It is this holy flesh through which the illness of human nature is being healed and which became both material and spiritual leaven of the renewed humankind. This process of divinization starts according to St. Maximus from the human mind which is by its nature closer to God in comparison to the rest of human essence. Soul and body acquire divinization indirectly through human mind.³⁷

Every created thing, from stone to seagull to the stars of heaven is an expression of the creative thought and will of the Triune God. Creation is at once, a word, or many words in a "book" of God, a gift of God, a symbol of God, and a song of God. Thus for St. Maximus the universe is a vast "cosmic liturgy," composed of word, gift, song and symbol in which heaven and earth are joined in a sacrifice of praise, thanksgiving and worship. Human nature, created in the image and likeness of God, is intended by God to be both microcosm and mediator of, in and through this cosmic liturgy. This means, according to Maximus, that human salvation and the transfiguration of the cosmos are inextricably linked. Just as all things are recapitulated in human nature as microcosmos, so too the human being is meant to bear the responsibility of mediator of creation, that is, to be the one in whom all things created are lifted up to God.

The Church is one and the same in and throughout each section. The wise thus glimpse the universe of things brought into existence by God's creation, divided between the spiritual world, containing incorporeal intelligent substances, and the corporeal world, the object of sense (so marvellously woven together from many natures and kinds of things) as if they were all another church, not built by hands, but suggested by the ones we build; its sanctuary in the world above, allotted to the powers above, its nave the world below, assigned to those whose lot it is to live in the senses... The holy Church of God is an image of the sensible world by itself; the sanctuary reminds one of the sky, the dignity of the nave reflects the earth. Likewise the world can be thought of as a church: the sky seems like a sanctuary, and the cultivation of the land can make it resemble a temple.³⁸

³⁰ Idem, *Quaestiones et dubia*, in *Corpus Christianorum. Series Graeca*, q. 64.

³¹ Idem, *Epistolae 10*, in PG 91, 449 B.

³² Idem, *Ambiguum Liber* in PG 91, 1308 B.

³³ Idem, *Quaestiones et dubia*, in *Corpus Christianorum. Series Graeca*, q. 118.

³⁴ Idem, *Quaestiones et dubia*, in *Corpus Christianorum. Series Graeca*, q. 68.

³⁵ Idem, *Quaestiones et dubia*, in *Corpus Christianorum. Series Graeca*, q. 25.

³⁶ Idem, *Quaestiones et dubia*, in *Corpus Christianorum. Series Graeca*, q. 54.

³⁷ Idem, *Quaestiones et dubia*, in PG 90, 833C;

³⁸ St. Maximus the Confessor, *The Mystagogia*.

At the close of the patristic era, St. John Damascene (675–749) lived among the early Islamic people of Damascus in what is modern Syria. He is distinguished particularly by his voluminous work, *The Exposition of the True Orthodox Faith*, which lays out the parameters for a comprehensive Christian theology. He stressed the importance of a non-pantheistic approach to creation:

I do not worship matter. I worship the Creator of matter who became matter for my sake, who willed to take His abode in matter, who worked out my salvation through matter. Never will I cease honouring the matter which wrought my salvation! I honour it, but not as God ... Because of this I salute all remaining matter with reverence, because God has filled it with his grace and power. Through it my salvation has come to me.³⁹

He indicated how the human person is a microcosm of the community of life:

Man, it is to be noted, has community with things inanimate and participates in the life of the unreasoning creatures, and shares in the mental processes of those endowed with reason. 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... plus the five physical senses... Lastly, man's reason unites him to incorporeal and intelligent natures, for he applies his reason and mind and judgement to everything and pursues after virtues and eagerly follows after piety, which is the crown of the virtues. And so man is a microcosm.⁴⁰

St. John Damascene repeatedly stresses God's working in all of creation and sees the harmony and beauty of creation as supreme evidence for God.⁴¹ He engages in a long analysis of creation, including its divisions, its elements, its humours, its winds, its geographical regions, and the make-up of the human body and the faculties of the soul, relying on much of the prevalent knowledge about the natural world. God is intimately involved in creation: 'God provides for all of creation, and through all creation He does good and instructs'.⁴² He vigorously rejects a negative interpretation of the human being because it would imply that 'all creatures will thus be evil' and would call the Scriptures lying when they affirm that God created all things very good.⁴³ He defends the Eucharist on the basis of God's creation and interprets it as a joining of natural and supernatural:

Now, bread and wine are used because God knows human weakness and how most things that are not constantly and habitually used cannot be put up with and are shunned. With His usual condescension, therefore, He does through the ordinary things of nature those which surpass the natural order. And just as in the case of baptism, because it is the custom of men to wash themselves with water and anoint themselves with oil He joined the grace of the Spirit to oil and water and made it a laver of regeneration, so, because it is man's custom to eat bread and drink water and wine He joined His divinity to these and made them His body and blood, so that by the ordinary natural things we might be raised to those which surpass the order of nature.⁴⁴

³⁹ St. John Damascene, *On the Divine Images* 1:16.

⁴⁰ St. John Damascene, *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, Book II, 12.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, Book I, 3.

⁴² *Ibid.*, Book II, 29.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, Book III, 15.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, Book IV, 13.

2. The Middle Ages

St. Symeon the New Theologian (949–1022) was one of the greatest of the Byzantine mystics and theologians, St. Symeon began his career in the Royal Court of the Eastern Roman Empire in Constantinople. He soon became disenchanted with courtly life and left to join the Studit monastery where a gifted “staretz”, or spiritual teacher, dwelled. Symeon eventually became more a spiritual master than a systematic theologian. Among his emphases is the accessibility of spiritual experience, especially connection to the Divine Light, which he describes as the personal, visible experience of the light of Christ within. He describes creation as a gift from God which is to be spiritualized through the rebirth and growth of Christ within each person. As the individual is renewed in Christ, so the creation which “awaits the manifestation of the sons of God” (Romans 8:19), is transformed with him. Thus he transforms creation, making it sing the praises of the divine Majesty. Regarding the purpose and destiny of creation, St. Symeon stated:

Only for me, [created] in your image and likeness, did You bring forth all creatures from nothing. You made me ruler of all things on earth for the glory of Your magnificence and Your goodness. What then does God do, the Maker of the universe, who also fashioned Adam? As God knew before the beginning of the world that His commands would be disobeyed, and as He had predetermined that Adam’s birth into a new life and his restoration would be subordinated to the fleshly birth of His only Son — what does God do? Creation has been given over to man, and it was for man that creation was made. Creation having become corruptible for corruptible (man), when man would be restored and be spiritual, incorruptible and immortal, God wishes that then creation itself would be freed from servitude and would be incorruptible and spiritual.⁴⁵

St. Symeon, in common with many Eastern thinkers has an essentially contemplative view of created reality:

No man can use his visual sense alone and properly comprehend the greatness of the heavens, or the extent of the earth, or the order of all things. How could bodily eyes ever manage to grasp things that transcend mind and understandings? It is only with difficulty that the mind can gain a true contemplation of existing reality, and only then after it has been purified of its own opinions, freed of its prejudices, and illumined by the grace and mercy of God. Even then, it only perceives insofar as it has been illumined.⁴⁶

This contemplation arrives at the concept of the two worlds, one visible and the other invisible, and the human person is at the crossroads between the two:

From the first, God created two worlds, the visible and the invisible, and has made a king to reign over the visible who bears within himself the characteristic features of both worlds — one in his visible half and the other in his invisible half — in his soul and his body. Two suns shine in these worlds, one visible and the other intellectual. In the visible world of the senses, there is the sun, and in the invisible world of the intellect, there is God, Who is called the sun of truth [or righteousness]. The physical world is illumined by the physical and visible sun; but the world of the intellect and those in it are illumined by the sun of truth in the intellect. Moreover, physical things are illumined by the physical sun, and things of the intellect by the sun of the intellect separately from one another, for they are not mixed with or merged into one another — neither the physical with the intellectual nor the intellectual with the physical. Of all the visible and invisible creation man alone is created dual. He has a body composed of the four elements, the senses and breath; and he has a soul, invisible, incorporeal, joined to the body in an ineffable

⁴⁵ St. Symeon the New Theologian, *The First and Second Thanksgiving* 1:2.

⁴⁶ St. Symeon the New Theologian, *The Practical and Theological chapters*, 1:34.

manner; they interpenetrate and yet are not compounded, combine and yet do not coalesce. This is what man is: an animal both mortal and immortal, both visible and invisible, both sensory and intellectual, capable of seeing the visible and knowing the invisible creation. As each of the two suns influences his own world separately, so they affect separately each side of man: one illumines the body and the other the soul, each giving of its own light to its own side, whether richly or sparingly according to what it can receive.⁴⁷

A Syrian monk who writes primarily for other monks. St. Peter of Damascus (1027? –1107?) lived in a small skete (a monastic village) in the Syrian desert. His writings depict a cosmos infused with the presence of God and he finds everywhere the love of God dwelling in all things. St. Peter of Damascus is important for ecological awareness because he reflects a cosmological vision in which God's providence embraces the whole of creation. This becomes accessible to us, he writes, as we are moulded into the likeness of God through the acquisition of the virtues and contemplation. From St. Peter of Damascus we learn that the world is a manifestation of divinity; that through creation we can discern the Word which sustains every creature; that through examination of both the little things and the large, we find the continuing work of our Lord Jesus Christ while still in this world. In accordance with the monastic style of his time, his writing is deliberately a systematic which requires the reader to restore the original internal harmony to arrive at his or her own view of their place in spiritual formation:

God's providence embraces the whole universe... By contemplating the beauty and use of each thing, (one who has acquired the habit of detachment) is filled with love for the Creator. He surveys all visible things: the sky, the sun, moon, stars and clouds, rain, snow and hail... thunder, lightening, the winds and breezes and the way they change, the seasons, the years...; the four-legged animals, the wild beasts and animals and reptiles, all the birds, the springs and rivers, the many varieties of plants and herbs, both wild and cultivated. He sees in all things the order, the equilibrium, the proportion, the beauty, the rhythm, the union, the harmony, the usefulness, the variety, the motion, the colours, the shapes, the reversion of things to their source, permanence in the midst of corruption. Contemplating thus all created realities, he is filled with wonder.⁴⁸

A visionary and prophet, St. Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179) was inspired by the audacity of the tasks given to her as she listened to the Word of God. We include her because her thought is eminently complementary to that of Eastern Christendom. She served as a Benedictine nun and abbess of a medieval German convent. She combined Christian theology with ethics and cosmology; produced an encyclopedia of medicine and natural science; authored liturgical hymns; and wrote the first Christian morality play. Beginning at the age of sixty, she undertook four lengthy missionary tours of Europe. Her contemporaries called her “the Sibyl of the Rhine,” and she ministered as an oracle of inspired counsel on topics from marital troubles to health problems and the ultimate destiny of souls. Today herbalists have rediscovered the benefits of her medical prescriptions and have applied her remedies in homeopathy. She saw things which were invisible to those around her; she foretold the future; and those who knew her said there was a continual “luminosity” around her head which she called “the reflection of the living light.” She wrote eloquently about God's blessings through the world and proclaimed that sin and corruption destroy the harmony of the cosmos and besmirch the grandeur of God's gift of creation. For her, nature evokes joy, wonder, praise, thanksgiving, and especially love. Hildegard's legacy to the modern world is that only a transformed heart, following Christ wherever He leads and willing to die to all idols, brings healing to the earth.

⁴⁷ Idem, “Practical & Theological Precepts” in *Philokalia on Prayer of the Heart* (London, 1951), 151–152.

⁴⁸ St. Peter of Damascus, *The Treasury of Divine Knowledge*, “The Sixth Stage of Contemplation” as found in *Philokalia*, Vol. III, trans. Philip Sherrard (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), pp. 136–137.

Do not denigrate anything God has created. All creation is simple, plain and good. And God is present throughout his creation. Why do you ever consider things beneath your notice? God's justice is to be found in every detail of what he has made. The human race alone is capable of injustice. Human beings alone are capable of disobeying God's laws, because they try to be wiser than God ... The rest of Creation cries out against the evil and perversity of the human species. Other creatures fulfil the commandments of God; they honour his laws. And other creatures do not grumble and complain about those laws. But human beings rebel against those laws, defying them in word and action. And in doing so they inflict terrible cruelty on the rest of God's creation.⁴⁹

St. Gregory of Sinai (1282–1360) was a monk who took vows on Mt. Sinai, hence his surname. He travelled to many monasteries to learn the arts of contemplation, silence and ceaseless prayer. He found that while the monks generally led pure lives, the ancient Christian contemplative practices had been lost in many places. Like St. Paul, who visited Paradise in a divine vision, St. Gregory gives us a perspective from actually having experienced some of these heavenly realities. He is known as a teacher of ceaseless mental prayer and wrote extensively on topics such as guarding the mind, maintaining true silence, achieving contemplation and avoiding delusions. He founded several monasteries in Macedonia and his instructions brought thousands to salvation. His cosmological vision has deep ecological relevance because he shows how the spiritual and physical worlds interconnect and because he provides instruction on how to find experience of the heavenly kingdom. His reflections indicate how the renewal of creation lies in the renewal of the human being:

For by renewing man and sanctifying him, even though in this transient life, he bears a corruptible body, God also renewed creation, although creation is not yet freed from the process of corruption. This deliverance from corruption is said by some to be a translation to a better state; by others to require a complete transmutation of everything sensory. Scripture generally makes simple and straightforward statements about matters that are still obscure.⁵⁰

St. Gregory Palamas (1296–1359) was a personal student and disciple of St. Gregory of Sinai. At the height of a monastic controversy on Mount Athos in Greece over the perception and nature of the light of Christ, Gregory Palamas defended the authenticity of the mystical experience of light because the scriptures show the Apostles saw this same light on Mount Tabor and because God is light. Gregory maintained that this is an “uncreated light” because God is uncreated. Experience of this light involves contact with His essence which is diffused through what he called the “divine energies” of God. The writings of Gregory Palamas are significant for modern ecology because he provides a theological foundation to assert a communion between God and creation through humanity and through the energies of Christ, and because he describes the process of creation's transformation through Christ without falling into a pantheistic confusion of the creation with the Creator which occurs if substance and energy are misunderstood. He beautifully describes the relationship between the macrocosmos and microcosmos:

God creates everything, but He remains uncreated. The fact that the world has a beginning is confirmed by nature and taught us by history ... Creation is not from God's essence; it is not the uncreated energies of God, but the result of the uncreated energies... To “beget” is the property of God's nature, but to “create” is the property of His energy and will. If there were no distinction between essence and energies, between nature and will, then the creatures would belong by nature to God... Man is animal in his body, but his soul originated in the transcendental world (υπερκosμίου) and is a superior creation. Man was made paradoxically a

⁴⁹ St. Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, 1.2.29–30.

⁵⁰ St. Gregory of Sinai, *On Commandments and Doctrines*, 11, as quoted in Philip Sherrard, editor and translator, *The Philokalia*, Vol. 4 (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), p. 214.

small world (μικροκόσμος) in which is summarized all the rest of creation. For this reason He created man to stand between, to include and to beautify both worlds, the visible and the invisible.⁵¹

3. Modern period

The relationship between the Church and the cosmos appears primarily in Saint Paul's letters to the Ephesians and the Colossians. According to Eph 1:22f, God 'put all things beneath his [Jesus Christ's] feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of the one who fills all things in every way.' There is a double lordship of Christ, both of which are connected to His majesty. The first is with respect to the universe, 'all things,' of which Christ is the Head in the sense of Lord (Eph 4:10; Phil 2:9–11). The second instead concerns the Church, of which Christ is the Head as its sustenance and life force in the sense of grace (Eph 1:22f).

It is important to note that, according to the Letter to the Ephesians, the cosmos is never presented as 'the Body of Christ.' Only the Church is the Body of Christ, and this closes the door to cosmocentrism and the organismic idea. Through the Church, Christ brings to completion the fullness of the world. The Church must bring man and the world to salvation: "Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature..." (Mk 16:15). In the Letter to the Colossians, the following is read:

He [Christ] is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things he himself might be preeminent ... For in him all the fullness was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile all things for him, making peace by the blood of his cross [through him], whether those on earth or those in heaven (Col 1:18ff).

The cosmic dimension of the Church was then established by Origen. He identified the Church as 'the world come to give order (Κόσμος σε του κόσμου ἡ εκκλησία), and precisely because Christ, the first "light of the world", became the order of the Church.'⁵² Christ applies the fruits of redemption to the cosmos through the Church. The Church is the only sacrament of salvation. The Church is the efficacious center of sacredness in the universe. While the act of redemption is complete in itself, its application to the cosmos must be brought to completion.

Modern Orthodox theology also discusses the ugliness, disorder, disfiguration, and desecration of creation by mankind. It does not ignore the ugliness of evil and the evil of ugliness, but faces squarely the shattered image of the creation now being deformed in the image of human sinfulness. There is a note of optimism, the optimism of the Orthodox Christian tradition, which points us "beyond the shattered image" to the redeemed and reconciled creation that even now to the purified sensibilities of the saint reveals the true image behind, beyond, and within creation: the face of God. For example, John Chrysavgis writes,

the sacramental character of creation defies all sacrilege on our part, reminding us at all times that the world embodies the divine... it is as though the face of the earth were like the Image of God—seen and yet also unseen. And it is as though the face of the world were like a human face—sketched but not completed. Ugliness and destruction only and ultimately confirm the promise of beauty and integration. The deformation of the earth's countenance calls for an involvement in the reconstruction of the world's authentic vision and goal... desacralization must be the first step leading towards transfiguration; division must lead us back to reconciliation of all; consumerism demands a corresponding asceticism.⁵³

⁵¹ St. Gregory Palamas, *Sermon 26* in PG151, 223.

⁵² Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, Book VI, n.38 in PG 14, 301–302.

⁵³ J. Chrysavgis, *Beyond the Shattered Image* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Light & Life Publishing, 1999), pp. 178–179.

The linchpin of Orthodox cosmology, according to Chrysavgis, is unquestionably the sacramental principle. The sacramental principle is the means by which “we understand the world around us as being sacred.” The world around us—which is, not coincidentally, the basic definition of environment—is not conceived in the Orthodox tradition as a conglomeration of objects, life-forms, and processes without intrinsic meaning, but a vast revelation of God, called by the Fathers of the Church the “Book of Nature,” composed of numberless *logoi* or “words of God.” All created beings, according to St. Maximus, are living symbols that reveal as well as conceal the presence and purpose of God in creation. The *sacred*, the *sacrament*, and the *symbol*: for Chrysavgis, these three elements form the basis of the sacramental ecology of the Orthodox tradition.

Occupying a central place in Orthodox theology is the theological notion of communion and the human person as “the priest of creation”. In this respect, communion not only involves communion with the Trinity, other persons and churches, but it also involves being in communion with the rest of creation. In the Book of Genesis 1:26–27 we read: ‘Then God said: “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and the cattle, and over all the wild animals and all the creatures that crawl on the ground.”’ God created man in his image; in the divine image he created him; male and female he created them.’ Here we find the basis considering the human being as the image of God. The first chapter of Genesis is at the basis of the Western approach, whereas the second chapter is related to the Eastern approach. In the East, the cosmos is considered the temple in which humanity carries out its priestly role in a theocentric perspective. In the West, on the other hand, the cosmos is understood as the home in which man is the administrator and caretaker in an anthropocentric perspective. This Western perspective is limited, because the cosmos is not renewed merely through human activity.

According to Zizioulas, the ancient liturgies of the church point very specifically to the human priestly action as representative of creation. This can be seen in the fact that the Eucharistic liturgies began their canon with a thanksgiving for *creation* in the first place, and only afterwards for redemption through Christ. Furthermore, he sees that the place where the mystery of Christ ‘in space and time’ occurs now is precisely in the Eucharist. As he says, in the Eucharist: “the Son presents us to the Father together with all creation as his own body.” It is precisely in the Eucharist, which we also call *communion*, where this renewal of created reality can actually occur. It is in this mystery that the ‘here and now’ of creation can encounter eternity, which is none other than the future accomplishment of God’s plan in Christ.

This, ultimately, is what he means by man being ‘priest of creation’ and what determines the salvation of creation as a whole. For Zizioulas, the union of the created with the uncreated occurs in the person of man who has been re-created in Christ. Through the hypostatic union Christ, the second divine person, assumes human nature and bridges the gap between the uncreated and created without confusion of the two natures. As Zizioulas neatly puts it, “The human creature will freely participate in the life of the persons of God and so all creation will be saved in and through man, in Christ.”⁵⁴

The reconciliation of the universe occurs through the Sacrifice of Christ on the Cross, which is applied through the Church particularly in the Sacrifice of the Mass. Through the Church, the glorified Lord unites the cosmos to Himself together with redeemed humanity in an ever more profound and efficacious way. The Church is the organ through which the unification of the universe in Christ, provided for in the eternal plan for the world, is actualized through history. The most ancient liturgical systems see all of creation included in the Eucharist of the Church, in the Sacrifice and sacrament of the Mass. The Eucharist is the true source of the reasons for a Christian

⁵⁴ See Metropolitan John (Zizioulas) of Pergamon, *Preserving God’s Creation. Three lectures on Theology and Ecology*, in *King’s Theological Review* 12 (1989), pp. 1–5; 41–45; 13 (1990), pp. 1–5. See also S. Ó hAodha, “Man as the ‘Priest of Creation’” on *Position Papers* (28 January 2016).

ecology. Only one who is united with the Eucharist perceives creation as a gift from God made in Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit; only one united in with Eucharist understands how all of creation, a community of co-creatures, is in relation with Christ, the firstborn of all creatures. Only one united with the Eucharist knows how to expectantly await, *donec veniat* (cf. 1 Cor 11:26), a new heaven and a new earth, when God will be all in all (cf. 1 Cor 15:28). The liturgical texts and their actions suggest an inclusive picture of ἔσχατον and θέωσις:

In the liturgy ‘things above’ rejoice and celebrate with ‘things below’. Various feasts (Nativity, Ascension, Pentecost, Dormition) speak of a bridge between heaven and earth or even of a unification of the two realms. In Christ’s incarnation heaven comes to earth, the ‘spiritual’ becomes ‘material’ (while not losing its own identity). And in the ascension Christ carries the material into the divine life of God, where it does not dispense with its materiality or its fleshly character.⁵⁵

In the Eucharist, everything expresses the faithful waiting ‘in joyful hope for the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ.’⁵⁶ Through the Eucharist, the ‘secret’ of the resurrection is assimilated. Therefore, rightly, Saint Ignatius of Antioch defined the Eucharist as the ‘medicine of immortality, and the antidote to prevent us from dying.’⁵⁷

The rightful concerns about the ecological conditions in many parts of the created world find comfort in the perspective of Christian hope, which commits us to work responsibly to safeguard creation. In the relationship between the Eucharist and the cosmos, in fact, we discover the unity of God’s design and are led to grasp the profound relationship between creation and the ‘New Creation,’ inaugurated by the resurrection of Christ, the New Adam. We participate in this new creation already by way of our Baptism (cf. Col 2:12f), and so, nurtured by the Eucharist, our Christian life opens us to the prospect of a new world, of a new heaven and a new earth, where the new Jerusalem descends from heaven, from God, ‘prepared as a bride adorned for her husband’ (Rev 21:2).⁵⁸ The eschatological tension evoked by the Eucharist expresses and reinforces the communion with the heavenly Church. A significant consequence of this eschatological tension inherent in the Eucharist is also the fact that it gives motion to our human journey through history, instilling a seed of living hope in the daily dedication of each individual to his or her given tasks.⁵⁹ If, in fact, the Christian vision leads to looking toward ‘a new heaven’ and ‘a new earth’ (cf. Rev 21:1), this does not weaken, but rather encourages our sense of responsibility toward the present earth.⁶⁰

Eastern theology also applies the eschatological dimension of the Eucharist to the theology of the environment.⁶¹ The Eucharist, in its most intimate nature, contains an eschatological dimension which, for as much as it penetrates history, never fully transforms into history and thereby transcends history. The Eucharist will open the road not to the dream of the moral perfection of the world (according to an evolutionary framework), but to the need for the radical exercise and experience of the ‘kenosis’ and the Cross, the only way to live the victory of the resurrection in the world until the end of time. As Pope Francis pointed out:

⁵⁵ C. M. Gschwandtner, *The Role of Non-Human Creation in the Liturgical Feasts of the Eastern Orthodox Tradition: Towards an Orthodox Ecological Theology* (Durham theses: Durham University, 2012), p. 153.

⁵⁶ Roman Missal, *Embolism after the Our Father*.

⁵⁷ Saint Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Ephesians*, XX in *Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume I, The Apostolic Fathers, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1995²), p.58.

⁵⁸ Cf. Pope Benedict XVI, Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis*, 92.

⁵⁹ Cf. Pope St. John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 19, 20.

⁶⁰ Cf. Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 39.

⁶¹ Cf. I. Zizioulas, *Il creato come eucaristia. Approccio teologico al problema dell’ecologia* (Magnano: Qiqajon, 1994).

It is in the Eucharist that all that has been created finds its greatest exaltation. Grace, which tends to manifest itself tangibly, found unsurpassable expression when God himself became man and gave himself as food for his creatures. The Lord, in the culmination of the mystery of the Incarnation, chose to reach our intimate depths through a fragment of matter. He comes not from above, but from within, he comes that we might find him in this world of ours. In the Eucharist, fullness is already achieved; it is the living centre of the universe, the overflowing core of love and of inexhaustible life. Joined to the incarnate Son, present in the Eucharist, the whole cosmos gives thanks to God. Indeed the Eucharist is itself an act of cosmic love.⁶²

The Eucharist, nonetheless, will simultaneously offer the world a taste of the eschatological reality, which penetrates history through the Eucharistic assembly and makes our divinization in space and time possible.

The basic theological dimensions of Eastern Christendom which characterize our vision of the environment can be summarized as follows:

1. The world has a beginning in a radical sense; it was created out of nothing, and is constantly threatened by the return to nothingness. It is not eternal, rather it is fragile, like a precious vase of crystal, and must be approached with reverence, fear and trembling.
2. This careful handling was entrusted by God to human beings, as distinct from all other beings and from angels. According to Patristic theology man was created, material and spirit, to be a microcosm of creation. Angels, being spiritual creations only, cannot bring the material world into contact with God. As the priests of creation we have the unique mission and great responsibility of uniting God and the material world. Our task is not simply to preserve creation but to purify it and elevate it to the level of divine existence. This act of elevation, the referring of creation to its creator; is the essence of our priesthood; thus creation is sanctified and partakes of the blessings that participating in divine life involves.
3. The salvation of human beings which is offered by and in Christ, is for us a cosmic event. Through human beings all creation will be saved. Christ not only saves us from ourselves, he offers the redemption of the whole of creation. The Incarnation of the Son of God as man was nothing but assuming human nature, not to save man in his own right, but because it carries with it the rest of creation by implication.
4. The Eucharist characterizes Orthodox theology not so much as a mental discipline but as an experience. Ever since Saint Irenaeus it has been understood that the Eucharist is not simply a memorial of Christ's death and resurrection, but is a cosmic event involving the whole of creation. Bread and wine are not just symbolic elements linking the Church to the Last Supper but are representative of the material world and of creation. Equally, human beings, by participating in the Eucharist, participate in a redeemed material world. Thus the material world has its place in the Eucharistic experience and in the Kingdom of God. The Orthodox Christian, by constantly experiencing the Eucharist, affirms that the material world must survive and be redeemed from whatever prevents it from developing into a world which will unite finally with God.
5. The ascetic experience, as affirmed by the Orthodox Church, has unfortunately often been mistaken as a negative attitude to material creation. The ascetic is seen as one who depreciates or rejects the material world. This is a Neoplatonic way of thinking and is not typical of the true asceticism of the Church. The ascetic abstains from the material world not because he regards matter as inferior but because he respects matter very much and does not want to exploit it for individual pleasure. Another often forgotten dimension of the ascetic experience is that the true ascetic participates in the suffering of the whole of creation, even to the extent of weeping over the death of a bird or animal. This sensitivity towards nature is

⁶² Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si*, 236.

not negative, rather it reflects a very positive attitude towards nature resulting from love and respect for the material world.⁶³

I close my paper with these words from the remarkable Akathist of Thanksgiving written in Russia by Metropolitan Tryphon (Prince Boris Petrovich Turkestanov), not long before his death in 1934:

How beautiful You are in the triumphant festival of spring, when all creatures come to life again and in a thousand ways joyfully call out to You:

You are the source of life, You are the victor over death.

To the song of the nightingale, the valleys and forests stand in snow white bridal array by the light of the moon. All the earth is Your bride, waiting for the immortal bridegroom. If you clothe even the grass in such a splendid way, how will You transfigure us in the future age of resurrection, how will our bodies be made light and our souls be made luminous.

Glory to You, Who brought out of the earth's darkness diversity of color, taste and fragrance,

Glory to You for the warmth and caress of all nature,

Glory to You for surrounding us with thousands of Your creatures,

Glory to You for the depth of Your wisdom reflected in the whole world,

Glory to You; I kiss reverently the footprint of Your invisible tread,

Glory to You Who kindled before us the bright light of eternal life,

Glory to You for the hope of immortal, ideal, incorruptible beauty,

Glory to You, O God, unto ages of ages.⁶⁴

BIBLIOGRAPHY

HAFFNER, P. *Towards a Theology of the Environment* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2008)

HAFFNER, P. *Visione cristiana dell'ambiente frutto della creazione di Dio* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2012)

HAFFNER, P. *The Tiara and the Test Tube. The Popes and Science from the Medieval Period to the Present*. (Leominster: Gracewing, 2014)

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Rev. Dr. Paul Haffner studied physics at Corpus Christi College, Oxford. In 1987, he defended and published his doctorate at the Gregorian University, under the title *Christian Faith in God the Creator in relation to Modern Science according to the works of S. L. Jaki*.

Since 1987, he has been a lecturer at the Pontifical Gregorian University and, since 2001 at the Duquesne University Italian campus in Rome, and since 2014 online at Seton Hall University. He is president of the Stanley Jaki Foundation since 13 April 2010, representative to the Holy See of Gracewing Publishing since 1 January 2012, and member of the Pontificia Academia Mariana Internationalis since 8 December 2012.

⁶³ Metropolitan John (Zizioulas) of Pergamon, "Orthodoxy and Ecological Problems: a Theological Approach" in D. Tarasios, *The Environment and Religious Education* (Milto Editions, 1997), pp. 26–30.

⁶⁴ Metropolitan Tryphon, *An Akathist in Praise of God's Creation*, Ikos 3.

Paul Michael Haffner

He is author of over 30 books and 150 articles on philosophical and theological themes, and many of his books have been translated into other languages, including Italian, Spanish, Portuguese and Russian.

Main website: <https://www.jeanhaffner.co.uk/>

Website for this presentation: <http://stmarys.paulhaffner.org>

© Paul Michael Haffner MMXXII