In an historical exploration of the concept of nature in Orthodox Christianity, there are three preliminary points that must be made: first, the notion of the natural world as distinct from the human part of creation is in fact classical Greek in origin; second, the Judaeo-Christian tradition does not consider nature as something separate or subordinated to human creation. Thus, nature is never either “divine” (since it is not God, but merely created by God) or “profane” (since it is always and closely connected to the creation of the human person in the image of God). Finally, the brief outline that follows examines the historical understanding of nature as this emerges in certain key thinkers and certain fundamental principles of Orthodox Christian theology.

An Orthodox Christian perspective on nature begins with the creation of the world through the Word of God, as described in the opening chapters of the Book of Genesis. Following the Judaeo-Christian tradition of thought, Athanasius of Alexandria (d.373) emphasized two particular factors of the creation story in his classic treatise On the Divine Incarnation: the creation of the world out of nothing (cf. II Macc. 7: 28) and the creation of humanity in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1: 26). Creation out of nothing implies the creation of the universe by an act of free will and in a movement of love. Creation of humanity in the divine image and likeness implies that we are endowed with similar freedom but that, like the rest of creation, we too are contingent and dependent on God. Both concepts require careful exegesis, inasmuch as the “nihil” out of which God made the world is not considered to be something outside of the scope of the divine energies, while the creation of Adam and Eve complements the first concept and
underlines the close connection between humanity and the natural world. John Chrysostom (d.407) describes creation as a form of doctrine. Indeed, in the mind of Anthony of Egypt (d.356), nature is an open book revealing the truth of God. Indeed, to detach oneself from matter is to cease to be human (Gregory of Nazianzus, d.c.390).

A part of the original creative plan, the Incarnation of the Word of God is not perceived simply as a result of human failure but in fact constitutes an essential and natural characteristic of God. In this respect, the Incarnation is to be seen as related to the creation of the entire world and not limited to the creation of humanity. Thus, Gregory of Nyssa (c.395) describes the mystery of Incarnation as a normative, and not an exceptional movement in the relationship between God and the world. Thus Christ appears as the center and focus of all things (cf. Col. 3:10-11), revealing the original beauty and restoring the ultimate purpose of the world. The entire world is likened to the extended human body, believed Origen of Alexandria (d.254); and it is especially likened to the body of Christ.

In the thought of the early Fathers, the Church as the Body of Christ is the experience of a new heaven and a new earth (cf. Rev. 21:1), whereby the heavenly penetrates and transforms the earthly. In this light, the emphasis in Orthodox thought has been on the “last times,” on the *eschaton* or the Kingdom of God. By contrast with Western theologians who underlined the significance of history from the time of Tertullian (d.c.225), Eastern theologians have emphasized the role of the meta-historical, the eternal or spiritual in the world. Thus, the world around has always been appreciated in light of the heavens above; and the Eucharist became the criterion by which the value of the natural world was determined. The “last times” expressed the conviction of the
early Christian Church about the lasting value of all things. The human person stands, as it were, between two worlds – between heaven and earth – and serves as a microcosm and a mediator that seeks to manifest and reconcile the spiritual through the material.

Created in the image and likeness of God, the human person is called to bless God for the entire creation as well as to bless the entire creation in returning it to God. In this respect, human beings are performing a royal and priestly function. The vocation of humanity is not to exploit nature but to transform it, not to dominate or destroy it but to cooperate with and sanctify it. The human person is to make connections, to draw bridges between the natural environment and the kingdom of heaven. Leontius of Cyprus (seventh century) noted the way in which we offer worship to God “through all creation visible and invisible,” as well as of the way “the moon and the stars glorify God through us.”

Although the writings of Dionysius the Areopagite (c.500) establish a notion of hierarchy within the heavens and the created order, yet he admits that “God moves outside of the divine realm in an act of extreme erotic love, approaching the world burning with goodness.” Human potentialities are more complex and varied than even those of angelic beings; and the implications of our actions are more manifold and mysterious for the natural environment than we could ever imagine. One of the tasks before us as human beings is to preserve the integrity, but also the diversity of God’s creation. No one among us has the right to reduce the scope of God’s presence in the natural world; rather, each one of us has the responsibility to embrace the breadth of God’s grace in every person, every animal, and every plant.
The para-priestly character of the human person in relation to the natural environment raises the concept of the iconic or symbolic dimension of the world. Creation brings us to a vision of God; *physike* leads to *theoria*. For Evagrius of Pontus (d.399), the contemplation of the physical reality involves the recognition of God’s presence in nature. Each place and each moment is a sacred space and time; each can serve as a window into eternity. Then each human being can discern his or her role within the natural order. Then we are able to move through the creation to the Creator, and “wherever we turn our eyes, we shall see God’s symbol” (Ephrem the Syrian, d. 373). This does not signify the adoration, but only the veneration of creation. An icon does not imply an idol. John of Damascus (c.749), the champion of icons, taught that “we do not worship creation in place of the Creator; we worship the Creator who assumed creation for our sake.”

By the fourteenth century, the relationship between the transcendent God and the immanent world was described in terms developed by Gregory Palamas (d.1359) who articulated the earlier teaching of the Church by expounding the doctrine of the distinction between divine essence and divine energies. The fundamental dichotomy in Judaeo-Christian thought was not between matter and spirit, but only between the sinful and the redeemed. Through the distinction between essence and energies in God, the Eastern Christian Church defined the relationship between God and creation by affirming that creation was charged with divine energy, that nothing was outside the embrace of God. Thus, the presence of God in the world is neither one of illusion (a-theistic) nor one of identification (pan-theistic). Orthodox Christianity would instead espouse a doctrine of pan-en-theism, regarding God as embracing the world and the world as being in God.
In more recent centuries, Christian Orthodox theologians have developed the concept of divine Wisdom in an effort to understand and proclaim the unity of heaven and earth that is most uniquely personified in Jesus Christ as the eternal creator who assumed creation. A single blade of grass should remind us of God, says Basil of Caesarea (d.379). And, for the ascetic tradition represented by John Climacus (d.c.649), each animal too bears the wisdom of the creator and testifies to God. Everything is seen to bear the seed, the sign, the reason (or logos, as Maximus the Confessor [d.662] called it) of the divine Logos or Word. The wisdom of God is the creative and unitive power in all things (cf. Wisdom of Solomon 9:1).

Now within the doctrine of the creation of the world by God, Orthodox Christianity proposes three fundamental principles that together comprise the vision of nature: (i) the world is good and beautiful. This means that no part of the natural world may be divorced from the loving care of God and the environmental concern of the Christian; (ii) the world is fallen or sinful. As a result of human failure, the process of cosmic transformation is incalculably costly and creation “travails” in expectation of deliverance (cf. Rom. 8: 22). Without freedom, there would be no sin. Yet, without freedom there would also be no love; finally, (iii) the world is redeemed. This means that nothing is intrinsically evil and everything has received the first fruits of transformation through the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ.

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Further Reading


