Christianity—Eastern Versus Western

An examination of the current Eastern Orthodox literature on nature, ecology and environment will show from the outset a recurrent feature. This concerns the clear demarcation between Eastern and Western Christianity (Roman Catholic as well as Protestant) as entire religious and cultural complexes in relation to these issues. It is believed that the historical development of these two parts of Christendom presented certain differences in theology and ethics, which had an immediate impact upon the way Eastern and Western Christians began to see and to treat nature. Given the fact that monotheistic religions and especially (Western) Christianity have been blamed (L. White) for fostering anti-nature attitudes and for being responsible to a large extent for the contemporary ecological crisis, many Orthodox thinkers tried to dissociate Eastern Orthodoxy from its Western Christian counterparts.

For these Orthodox the whole problem is closely connected to the rise of the Western worldview in modern times in the wake of the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Scientific and Technological Revolution, the Enlightenment, and the Industrial Revolution. Western Christianity played, albeit in many cases indirectly, an instrumental role to the appearance of this culture, which has later acquired almost planetary dimensions. Two main characteristics of this development were individualism and dualism. Individualism saw humans as self-sufficient and static beings without real communion to one another and respect for the surrounding physical environment. The orientations and the needs of the individual held priority in the system of values of modernity. The passing to a utilitarian and egoistic society of self-adoration was the
normal consequence of this. Furthermore, dualism provided individuals with several Manichean polarities that created a barrier between the spiritual and the material and between humans and nature. In this context, knowledge of nature was identified with its control and subjection. Nature was de-sacralised and seen as an inanimate machine working according to standard laws that could be fully explored. Moreover, nature was falsely considered as an endless source of wealth for the satisfaction of individual needs and wholesale exploitation. By identifying having with possessing and controlling and by believing in a continuous progress, modern humans began to exploit uncritically natural resources, to produce and to consume at a growing rate. This optimism has been largely destroyed in the course of the 20th century by various serious events including the world wars and the rise of nihilism. The quest for alternative worldviews and more holistic spiritualities (from the Far East) was but only a sign of the many deadlocks of the modern Western civilization.

By contrast, Eastern Orthodoxy is considered to offer another understanding human beings in relation to God and nature beyond individualism and dualism. The ontology of personhood, based on the loving community between the three persons of the Holy Trinity, serves as a prototype for another kind of human existence. The latter is not viewed in a utilitarian and individualistic way, but as a harmonious coexistence with nature, which is the gift of God to humans. The person signifies relationship, nearness and unity, while the individual stands for distance, separation and alienation. From this holistic perspective, humans are the stewards and not the masters of creation. They have to take care of it, to transform it and to give it back to the Creator. This presupposes an eschatological understanding of nature, which is not going to be destroyed but to be
transfigured. In this way, humans, as representing a micro-cosmos, are an integral part of creation, which should not be simply subjected to systematic exploitation, utilitarian needs, bare materialism and consumerism.

Furthermore, nature is not an object, i.e., something lying outside of and opposite to humans, which must be thoroughly subjected to human reasoning, power and control. Rather it should be seen as a living organism, the house, in which humans live and work and which deserves particular protection, care and reverence (cf. Gen. 2:15). Knowledge means in this context a loving and holistic union with nature. In order to achieve a harmonious coexistence with nature and to overcome ecological crisis humans have to articulate a new hierarchy of values towards nature. This implies the development of a new ethos of self-sacrifice towards nature. The latter suffers the consequences of the original sin too, which has destroyed the previous paradisiacal conditions. In the end, nature must be transformed by humans according to the prototype provided by Jesus Christ during his earthly life and symbolized in the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist. In addition, humans must develop a spirit of ecological asceticism by setting a new agenda of life and their real needs beyond self-centered utilitarianism and consumerism. Human control of nature should not be equated with its domination, but with a responsible diakonia, a service for the sake of the whole creation. This is the new ethos, the new stance and the new mentality, which Orthodoxy conveys to the modern materialistic global culture and which cannot be simply codified in legal frames and political programs.

This Orthodox understanding of nature and solution to the modern ecological impasse, based mostly on Biblical and Patristic sources, raises however the question
concerning their applicability, namely the extent to which these ideas have really influenced the attitudes of Orthodox cultures toward nature. This is because if one examines these cultures in Eastern and South Eastern Europe, one will realize - curiously enough - that environmental conscience is usually far less developed among Orthodox than Western Christians. This means also that the above Orthodox ideas, apart from being too theoretical, do not depict accurately historical as well as contemporary reality. Although there is enough truth in the argument that the Western world has historically played a crucial role for the present environmental degradation, the way the whole issue is taken up by Orthodox thinkers is misleading. This is because they usually are apologetic towards Eastern Orthodoxy and intend to show its authenticity and consequently its superiority over Western Christianity. Thus, the existing serious discrepancy between theory and practice in this issue, along with other arguments, show the relativity of the sharp demarcation between Eastern and Western Christianity.

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Further Reading


