On Earth as in Heaven : transforming perspectives and practices

Autor(en): **Chryssavgis, John**

Objekttyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Internationale kirchliche Zeitschrift : neue Folge der Revue internationale de théologie**

Band (Jahr): **105 (2015)**

Heft 1

PDF erstellt am: **28.04.2024**

Persistenter Link: https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-583622

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Inhalten der Zeitschriften. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern.
Die auf der Plattform e-periodica veröffentlichten Dokumente stehen für nicht-kommerzielle Zwecke in Lehre und Forschung sowie für die private Nutzung frei zur Verfügung. Einzelne Dateien oder Ausdrucke aus diesem Angebot können zusammen mit diesen Nutzungsbedingungen und den korrekten Herkunftsbezeichnungen weitergegeben werden.
Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. Die systematische Speicherung von Teilen des elektronischen Angebots auf anderen Servern bedarf ebenfalls des schriftlichen Einverständnisses der Rechteinhaber.

Haftungsausschluss

Alle Angaben erfolgen ohne Gewähr für Vollständigkeit oder Richtigkeit. Es wird keine Haftung übernommen für Schäden durch die Verwendung von Informationen aus diesem Online-Angebot oder durch das Fehlen von Informationen. Dies gilt auch für Inhalte Dritter, die über dieses Angebot zugänglich sind.

Ein Dienst der *ETH-Bibliothek*
ETH Zürich, Rämistrasse 101, 8092 Zürich, Schweiz, www.library.ethz.ch

http://www.e-periodica.ch

On Earth as in Heaven
Transforming Perspectives and Practices

John Chryssavgis

Introduction: The Sixth Day of Creation

Permit me to take you on a journey back to what theologians call "the beginning." This is surely the starting point for speaking about the environment. Yet, whenever we think of the Genesis story, we focus on our creation by a loving God but forget our connection to our environment. Whether this is a natural reaction or a sign of arrogance, we tend to overemphasize our creation "in the image and likeness of God" (Gen. 1.26) and overlook our creation from "the dust of the ground." Nevertheless, our "heavenliness" does not overshadow our "earthliness." Most people are unaware that we human beings did not get a day to ourselves in the creation account. In fact, we shared that "sixth day" with the creeping and crawling things of the world (Gen. 1.24–26). We enjoy a binding unity with God's world. It is helpful – and humble – to recall this truth.

In recent years, of course, we have been painfully reminded of this truth with the cruel flora and fauna extinction, with the irresponsible soil and forest clearance, and with the unacceptable noise, air, and water pollution. Still, our concern for the environment cannot be reduced to superficial or sentimental love. It is a way of honoring our creation by God, of hearing the "groaning of creation" (Rom. 8.22). It should be an affirmation of the truth of that sixth day of creation. Anything less than the full story – the full truth – is dangerous heresy.

Speaking of "heresy" in assessing the ecological crisis is not farfetched. For whenever we speak of heavenly or earthly things, we are invariably drawing upon established values of ourselves and our world. The technical language we adopt or the particular "species" we preserve, all depend on values and images that we promote, even presume. We tend to call our predicament an "ecological crisis." I propose that the cause of the problem is rooted in the paradigms that impel us to pursue a particular lifestyle. The crisis concerns the way we imagine our world. It is – essentially, ultimately – a battle over icons.

In classical traditions, human beings regarded themselves as descendant from God (or the gods). They looked on the world as soul-ful, not soul-less; as sacred (like them), not subjected (to them). In their experience

and memory, every flower, every bird, every star was holy. The sap of trees was identified with their life-blood. Nature was not an object for experimentation or exploitation; trade was never at the expense of nature.

So when we consider the experience and memory of the Church, we should emphasize its distinct symbols and values, which include: icons (as the way we view and perceive creation); liturgy (as the way we celebrate and respond to creation); and ἄσκησις/askēsis (as the way we respect and treat creation). Early mystics recognized that "everything that breathes praises God" (Ps. 150.6); the entire world is a "burning bush of God's energies." When, as Isaac the Syrian says, "our eyes are opened to the beauty of things," we can discern the "divine sparks scattered everywhere."

1. The Iconic Vision of Nature

With regard to "speaking about the environment," seeing clearly is precisely what icons teach us to do. The world of the icon reveals the eternal dimension in all that we see and experience. Our generation, it may be said, is characterized by a sense of self-centeredness toward the natural cosmos, by a lack of awareness of the beyond. We have broken the sacred covenant between our selves and our world.

Well, it is the icon that restores, that reconciles. The icon reminds us of another world. The icon provides a corrective to our culture, which gives value only to the here and now. It aspires to the inner vision of all, the world as created and as intended by God. Traditionally, the first image attempted by an iconographer is the Transfiguration of Christ on Mount Tabor. For the iconographer strives to hold together this world and the next. By disconnecting this world from heaven, we in fact desacralize both. It speaks in this world the language of the age to come.

And it is here that the doctrine of the divine incarnation, at the heart of iconography, emerges. In the icon of Jesus Christ, the uncreated God assumes a creaturely face, a "beauty that can save the world," as Dostoevsky puts it. And in Orthodox icons, faces are always frontal, depicting two eyes that gaze back at the beholder. The conviction is that Christ is in our midst, Emmanuel (Matt. 1.23). Profile signifies sin; it implies rupture. Faces are "all eyes," profoundly receptive, eternally susceptive of divine grace. "I see" means that "I am seen," which in turn means that I am in communion.

Thus, the icon converts the beholder from a restricted worldview to a fuller vision. The light of icons is the light of reconciliation. It is not the

waning light of this world; it "knows no evening," to quote an Orthodox hymn. And so icons depicting events that occurred in daytime are no brighter than icons depicting events that occurred at nighttime. For example, the icon of the sorrowful descent from the Cross is no darker than the icon of Ascension; the icon of the Nativity no brighter than that of the Crucifixion; the light of the Last Supper very similar to that in the Transfiguration.

This is because the icon presupposes another way of seeing things; a "different way of life," as we sing on Easter Sunday. The language of the icon is the language of silence and mystery, although it is a language that has so much to offer to a world like ours, which has been inundated with information and idols.

So the entire world is a ladder, an icon; "everything is a sign of God," as Irenaeus of Lyons once said. This is why, in icons, rivers assume a human form, as do the sun and the moon and the stars and the waters. They all assume human faces; they all acquire a personal dimension – just like us; just like God. And if the world is an icon, then nothing whatsoever lacks sacredness. Indeed, if God is not visible in creation, then neither can God be worshiped as invisible in heaven.

2. The Liturgy of Nature

What icons achieve in space, liturgy accomplishes in song: the same ministry of reconciliation between heaven and earth. If we are guilty of relentless waste, it may be because we have lost the spirit of worship. We are no longer respectful pilgrims on this earth; we have become mere tourists. At a time when we have polluted the air that we breathe and the water that we drink, we must restore a sense of awe and delight in our relationship to the world.

Now by liturgical I do not imply ceremonial. I mean relational. Or, to develop the earlier concept of icons, we are to think of the world as a picture, an image: one requires every part of a picture in order for it to be complete. If we remove one part of the picture – whether a tree, or an animal, or a human being – then the entire picture is distorted.

The truth is that we respond to nature with the same delicacy, the very same sensitivity and tenderness, with which we respond to any human person in a relationship. We have learned that we cannot treat people like things; let me suggest to you today that we must learn not to treat even

things like mere things. Because all of our spiritual activities are measured by their impact on the world, on people, especially the poor.

So liturgy is precisely the language that commemorates the innate and intimate connection between God, people and things, between everyone and everything – what in the 7th century St. Maximus the Confessor called a "cosmic liturgy"; what in the same century St. Isaac the Syrian described as acquiring: "a merciful heart, which burns with love for the whole of creation – for humans, for birds, for the beasts, for demons – for all God's creatures." And in the early 20th century, Fyodor Dostoevsky conveyed the same idea in *The Brothers Karamazov:* "Love all God's creation, the whole of it and every grain of sand. Love every leaf, every ray of God's light! … If you love everything, you will perceive the divine mystery in things."

So there is a dimension of art, music, and beauty in the world. This means that whenever we narrow life (even religious life) to ourselves and our own interests, we neglect our vocation to reconcile and transform all of creation. Let me propose to you that our relationship with this world determines our relationship with heaven. The way we treat the earth is reflected in the way that we pray to God.

3. The Body of the World; or, The World of Ascesis

Of course, unless you live in Maine as I do, this world does not always look or feel like heaven. And in the wake of the Fukushima nuclear disaster three years ago or BP's oil disaster a year before that, it was admittedly somewhat difficult to perceive what Dostoevsky called "the divine mystery in things."

This is why, in his letter to the Colossians, St. Paul writes: "Through [Christ], God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, through the blood of his cross" (1.20). Reference here to "the blood of the cross" is an indication of the cost involved. It reminds us of the reality of human failure and the need for cosmic repentance. What is required is nothing less than a radical reversal of our perspectives and practices.

There is a price to pay for our wasting. The balance of the world has been shattered; and the ecological crisis will not be solved with sentimental slogans or even recycling programs. The "tree of the cross" reveals a way out of our ecological impasse by proposing self-denial as a solution to self-centeredness.

In the Orthodox tradition, this translates into askēsis, the way of liberation from egocentrism, the way of assuming responsibility for one's actions and one's world. It is sometimes helpful to look in the mirror and to ask: Is what we have what we need? Did I travel here on a plane to deliver my address to you? How do I reflect the world's thirst for oil or greed that is destroying the planet?

It is compelling that the earth reminds us of our denial. Yet we still stubbornly refuse to accept that our comfortable lives, dependent as they are on cheap energy, are in any way responsible for the Gulf of Mexico being polluted by millions of gallons of oil. How can we, as intelligent human beings, believe that a century of pumping oil-fired pollution into the atmosphere has no ramification?

Askēsis means learning to be free, uncompelled by ways that use the world; characterized by self-control and the ability to say "no" or "enough." Askēsis aims not at detachment or destruction, but at refinement and restoration. Take a familiar example of askēsis: fasting. Learning to fast is actually learning to share; it is learning to give and not simply give up. It is recognizing in other people faces – icons, we might say – and recognizing in the earth the very face of God.

And here, I think, lies the heart of the problem. For we are unwilling – in fact, violently resist any call – to adopt simpler lives. Before "speaking about the environment" to others, we must consider how we ignore this call as Orthodox Christians. We have misplaced the spirituality of simplicity and frugality. The challenge is this: How do I live in such a way that promotes harmony, and not division? How can I acknowledge – daily – that "the earth is the Lord's" (Ps. 23.1)?

Returning now to the practice of fasting, we may conclude that to fast is to see more clearly the original beauty of the world. It is moving away from what I want to what the world needs. Fasting means valuing everything for itself, not simply for myself. It involves regaining a sense of wonder and being filled with a sense of God-liness. It is seeing all things in God, and God in all things.

4. The Sign of Jonah

There is a profound iconographic depiction of this perception in an 18th-century icon at the Monastery of Toplou in Crete. The iconographer is Ioannis Kornaros (1745–1796). It is literally a theological statement in color. The icon derives its title from the Great Blessing of the Waters at the

Feast of Epiphany on January 6, which is repeated during the Baptism of every Orthodox Christian: "Great are you, O Lord, and wondrous are your works; no words suffice to hymn your wonders!"

At the far left of this image, nature is portrayed as a woman, reflecting "mother earth," which indigenous peoples throughout the world (like Indians of North America and Aborigines of Australia) have respected for centuries. Nature extends her arms in a gesture of openness and embrace toward all people and all things (Ps. 85.1). The icon depicts urban life (the cities of Samaria and Nineveh are in the background) and agricultural life (with farmers tilling the slopes). We can see people and rivers and vegetation, while a vast rainbow reflects the eternal covenant between the Creator and creation.

While the icon is abundantly rich in symbolism, let me draw your attention to two particular scenes. The first depicts Jonah being cast from the mouth of a large sea beast, as in the biblical story. This is a powerful and profound image of resurrection and the renewal of all things. One of the early symbols of Christ, whereby Christians recognized one another, was the fish – the Greek word being an acronym for "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior." The fish, then, is a statement of our faith and salvation. Christ has been integrally and inseparably identified with fish. Any abuse of fishing or over-fishing relates in a personal and profound way to Christ Himself.

The second scene depicts the slaying of Abel by Cain, a violent representation of the destructive impact of our current policies and practices on future generations. We cannot remain passive observers (or, worse, active contributors) to the merciless violation of the earth. Until we perceive in the pollution of our planet the portrait of our *brother and sister,* we cannot resolve the injustice and inequality of our world. Until we discern in the pollution of our planet the face of our *children,* we will not comprehend the irreversible consequences of our actions.

Conclusion: The Way Forward

Not long ago, my elder son and I paid a routine visit to the optometrist. Alex isn't as meticulous as he should be with his eye care. So as he received his new prescription, I overheard his reaction: "Wow! *That's* what I'm supposed to see?" When we look at our world, what do we see? Because the way we view our planet reflects how we relate to it. We *treat* our planet in a god-forsaken manner precisely because we see it in this way.

In his classic article entitled "The Roots of our Ecological Crisis," medieval historian Lynn White Jr. (1907–1987) already suspected this truth, noting that: "The Greek saint contemplates; the Western saint acts. The Latins felt that sin was moral evil, that salvation lay in right conduct. The implications of Christianity for the conquest of nature would emerge more easily in the Western atmosphere."

Far too often, we are convinced that solving the ecological crisis is a matter of *acting* differently – more effectively or more sustainably perhaps. Paradoxically, ecological correction may in fact begin with environmental in-action or mere awareness. It is a matter of contemplation, of *seeing* things differently. First, we must *stop* what we are *doing*. Then we might gain new "in-sight" into our world. Peering through this lens, even foreign policy and the economy actually *look* different, whereby we can abandon the urge for unbridled expansion and instead focus on the sustainability we so desperately need.

Some years ago, a prominent presidential advisor and World Bank economist arrogantly declared: "America cannot and will not accept any 'speed limit' on economic growth." Have we become so addicted to fantasies about riches without risk and profit without price? Do we honestly believe that our endless and mindless manipulation of the earth's resources comes without cost or consequence? Our economy and technology are toxic when divorced from our vocation to see the world as God would. And if God saw the world as "very good" on that sixth day of creation, then we too can begin to sense in our world the promise of beauty and to see the world in its unfathomable interrelatedness.

So the question that I leave you with is this: How do we live in such a way that reflects spiritual values, that communicates generosity and gratitude, not arrogance and greed? Because if we don't, then a significant patch of the Gulf Coast will have been lost in vain; and the Fukushima nuclear disaster precipitated by the tsunami will have gone unnoticed. But if we do, believe me, we will hear the ocean groan, and notice the grass grow, and feel the seal's heart beat.

Dr. John Chryssavgis (1958), Mitglied der griechisch-orthodoxen Erzdiözese in Amerika, ist Erzdiakon des Ökumenischen Patriarchats und theologischer Berater des Ökumenischen Patriarchen bezüglich Umweltfragen.