

ICONS AND COSMOS

Iconography and Eco-theology¹

John Chryssavgis

Introduction

Whenever we think of the Genesis account of creation, we tend to forget our connection to the earth and our environment. Perhaps it is natural reaction; or perhaps it is a sign of our arrogance, that we tend to overemphasize our creation “in the image and likeness of God” (Gen. 1:26) and overlook our creation from the dirt and “the dust of the ground” (Gen. 2:7). Our “heavenliness” should not overshadow our “earthliness.” Most people may be unaware that we human beings did not get a day to ourselves in Genesis. In fact, we shared the sixth day with the creeping and crawling things of the world (Gen. 1:24-26). There is a binding unity and continuity that we share with all of God’s creation. Indeed, the depth of Adam (*haadam*) is originally created from and deeply correlated to the topsoil of the earth (*adamah*). It is helpful to recall this truth.

In recent years, we have been reminded—indeed, in a painful way—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. Yet our concern for the environment is not a form of superficial or sentimental love. It is a way of honoring and dignifying our very creation by the hand and word of God. It is a way of listening to “the mourning of the land” (Hosea 41:3) and “the groaning of creation” (Rom. 8:22). This chapter is dedicated to the wholeness of truth experienced on that sixth day of creation. Anything less than the full story, any deviation from the fullness of that truth, is a dangerous heresy.²

¹ Lecture presented at the Cathedral of the Church of Estonia, Tallinn, September 13, 2009. This presentation draws substantially on my introduction to *Cosmic Grace, Humble Prayer: ecological initiatives of the Green Patriarch* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans Publications, 2003) and on chapter 7 of *Light Through Darkness: Orthodox spirituality* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 2004).

² The Greek term “heresy” (*airesis*) implies a partial or incomplete truth. See also P. Sherrard, *Human Image, World Image* (Ipswich UK: Golgonooza Press, 1990); K. Ware, *Through the Creation to the Creator* (London: Friends of the Center Papers, 1997); and John (Zizioulas) of Pergamon, “Preserving

Speaking about heresy when it comes to assessing the environmental crisis is not too far-fetched. Whenever we speak (whether about things in heaven or on earth), we are always drawing upon established values of ourselves and of our world. The technical language that we adopt, and even the particular “species” that we wish to preserve, all depend on the values and the images that we promote, or rather presume. In Orthodox spirituality, symbols and images certainly play a significant role. When I consider images, I think of the central importance of:

- icons (i.e., the way we view and perceive creation);
- liturgy (i.e., the way we celebrate and respond to creation); and
- asceticism (i.e., the way we respect and treat creation).

A sense of the holy in nature implies that everything that lives is holy. Everything that breathes praises God (Ps. 150:6); the entire world is a “burning bush of God’s energies,” as Gregory Palamas stated in the fourteenth century. If we are still, if we grow sensitive, then “our eyes are opened to see the beauty of created things.”³ Seeing clearly is precisely what icons teach us to do.

I. The Iconic Vision of Nature

As already observed, icons, or sacred images, bear a central importance in Christian Orthodox thought and spirituality. The world of the icon offers new insights, new perceptions into reality. It reveals the eternal dimension in everything that we see and experience in our environment. Our generation, it may be said, is characterized by a sense of self-centeredness toward the natural cosmos, by a lack of awareness of or communication with the beyond. We appear to be inexorably locked within the confines of our individual concerns—even in our desire to escape from this impasse—with no access to the world outside or around us. We have broken the sacred covenant, the symbolical connection between our selves and our world.

Well, the icon restores; it reconciles. The icon reminds us of another way and

God’s Creation: Three Lectures on Theology and Ecology,” *King’s Theological Review* 12, 1989.

³ Abba Isaac the Syrian, *Ascetic Treatises* 65.

reflects another world. It offers a corrective to the culture that we have created, which gives value only to the here and now. The icon aspires to reveal the inner vision of all, the world as created and as intended by God. Very often, it is said, the first image attempted by an iconographer is that of the Transfiguration of Christ on Mt. Tabor. This is precisely because the iconographer struggles to hold together this world and the next, to transfigure this world in light of the next. By disconnecting this world from heaven, we have in fact desacralized both. The icon articulates with theological conviction our faith in the heavenly kingdom. The icon does away with any objective distance between this world and the next, between material and spiritual, between body and soul, time and eternity, creation and divinity. The icon reminds us that there is no double vision, no double order in creation. It speaks in this world the language of the age to come.

This is why the doctrine of the divine incarnation, the divine economy, the “plan” of reconciliation, is at the very heart of iconography. In the icon of Jesus Christ, the uncreated God assumes a creaturely face, a beauty that is exceeding (Ps. 44:2), a “beauty that can save the world.”⁴ And in Orthodox icons, the faces—whether of Christ, or of the saints in communion with Christ—are always frontal, depicted with two eyes gazing back at the beholder. The conviction is that Christ is in our midst, here, Emmanuel (Matt. 1:23). Profile signifies sin; it implies a rupture in communication or communion. Faces are frontal, all eyes, eternally receptive and susceptible of divine grace. “I see” means that “I am seen,” which in turn means that I am in communion. This is the powerful experience of the invisible and the immortal, a passing over to another way of seeing. This is “Passover,” *Pascha*. It is resurrection.

The icon converts the beholder from a restricted, limited point of view to a fuller, spiritual vision, where we see everything as reconciled and as united in a single reality, “in Him through whom all things live, move, and have their being” (Acts 17:28). For the light of the icon is the light of reconciliation, the light of restoration, the light of the resurrection. It is not the waning light of this world; it “knows no evening,” to quote an Orthodox hymn. This is why icons depicting events that occurred in the daytime are no brighter than icons depicting events that occurred at nighttime. The icon of Gethsemane,

⁴ F. Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, quoted in N. Arseniev, *Mysticism and the Eastern Church* (Marburg: Student Christian Movement, 1926 [Reprint St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press (New York, 1979), 118-119]).

for example, is no darker than the icon of Pentecost. The icon of the resurrection is no brighter than the icon of the crucifixion. The icon presupposes, indeed proposes another light in which to see things, a “different way of life,” as the Orthodox Easter liturgy proclaims. This is a vision that liberates us from every alien vision. It provides for us another means of communication, beyond the conceptual, beyond the written, beyond the spoken word. This is the language of silence and of mystery, the language of the kingdom to come.

The entire world is an icon, a door, a window, a point of entry, opening up to a new reality.⁵ Everything in this world is a sign, a seed. “Nothing is a vacuum in the face of God,” wrote Irenaeus of Lyons in the second century; “everything is a sign of God.” Everything and everyone, contains this dimension, bears this transparency. And so in icons, rivers assume human form; so, too, do the sun and the moon and the stars and the waters. All of these assume human faces; all of them acquire a personal dimension—just like people; just like God.

And if the earth is an icon, if this world is an image that reflects the presence of God, then nothing whatsoever can be neutral, nothing at all lacks sacredness. No land is *terra incognita*. The Christian is simply the one who discerns and encounters Christ everywhere, the one who recognizes the whole world as the dwelling-place of Christ. For if God were not visible in creation, then neither could God be worshiped as invisible in heaven.

II. The Liturgy of Nature

What the Orthodox icon does in space and matter, the Christian Orthodox liturgy effects in praise and time: namely the same ministry of reconciliation, the anticipation and participation of heaven on earth. If we are guilty of relentless waste, it is perhaps because we have lost the spirit of worship. We are no longer respectful pilgrims on this earth; we have been reduced to mere tourists.

We have already introduced the world of liturgy; this section will, therefore, concentrate solely on the environmental perspectives of liturgy. The Eastern Orthodox

⁵ On icons, see L. Ouspensky, *Theology of the Icon* (New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1992); and P. Evdokimov, *Art of the Icon: A Theology of Beauty* (Redondo Beach CA: Oakwood Publications, 1990).

Church retains a liturgical view of the created world, proclaiming a world imbued by God and a God involved in this world. Our original sin, so it seems, lies in our prideful refusal to receive the world as a gift of reconciliation, humbly to regard the world as a sacrament of communion. At a time when we have polluted the air that we breathe and the water that we drink, we are called to restore within ourselves the sense of awe and delight, to respond to matter as to a mystery of ever-increasing connections.

By liturgical, however, I do not imply ritual. I mean movement, dynamism, and creativity. The world is not static, as Plato might have believed; nor again is it eternally reproduced, as the classical world-view might have proposed. It is a movement toward an end, toward a final purpose, toward a sacred goal. It is neither endless, nor purposeless. It is essentially relational. To adopt the concept of icons, we are to think of the world too as a picture, as an image: one requires every part of a picture for it to be complete, from the Alpha to the Omega. If one were to move (or to remove, still more so, to destroy) one part of the picture—whether a tree, or an animal, or a human being—then the entire picture would be affected (or distorted, perhaps even destroyed).

The truth is that we respond to nature with the same delicacy, the very same sensitivity, and exactly the same tenderness with which we respond to any human person in a relationship. We have learned not to treat people like things; we must now learn not to treat even things like mere things. All of our ecological activities are measured ultimately by their effect on people, especially upon the poor. And all of our spiritual activities are judged by their impact on our world, especially upon the environment.

Therefore, liturgy is a commemoration of the innate connection between God and people and things. It is a celebration of the sense of communion, this dance of life. When we enter this inter-dependence of all persons and all things—this “cosmic liturgy,” as St. Maximus the Confessor described it—then we can begin to understand the environmental crisis, and to resolve issues of ecology or of economy. In the seventh century, St. Isaac the Syrian described this 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 of God’s creatures.⁶

And in the early part of the twentieth century, Fyodor Dostoevsky embraced the same truth in *The Brothers Karamazov*, relating—indeed, reconciling—compassion to forgiveness in the words of Staretz Zossima:

Brothers, be not afraid of men’s sins. Love man even in his sin, for that already bears the semblance of divine love and is the highest love on earth. Love all God’s creation, the whole of it and every grain of sand. Love every leaf, every ray of God’s light! Love the animals, love the plants, love everything. If you love everything, you will perceive the divine mystery in things. And once you have perceived it, you will begin to comprehend it ceaselessly more and more every day. And you will at last come to love the whole world with an abiding, universal love. Love the animals: God has given them the rudiments of thought and untroubled joy. Do not, therefore, trouble it, do not torture them, do not deprive them of their joy, do not go against God’s intent. Man, do not exalt yourself above the animals: they are without sin, while you with your majesty defile the earth by your appearance on it and you leave the traces of your defilement behind you—alas, this is true of almost every one of us! Love children especially, for they, too, like the angels, are without sin, and live to arouse tender feelings in us and to purify our hearts, and are as a sort of guidance to us. Woe to him who offends a child!⁷

Father Zossima goes on to instruct young monks about the need to struggle for

⁶ *Mystic Treatises, Homily 48* (Brookline: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 1986), 30.
⁷ Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamozov* (Harmondsworth UK: Penguin, 1982), vol. 1, 375-376.

forgiveness:

Brothers, love is a teacher, but one must know how to acquire it, for it is acquired with difficulty, it is dearly bought, one must spend a great deal of labor and time on it, for we must love not only for a moment and fortuitously, but for ever. Anyone can love by accident, even the wicked can do that. My young brother asked forgiveness of the birds: it may seem absurd, but it is right nonetheless, for everything, like an ocean, flows and comes into contact with everything else: touch it in one place and it reverberates at the other end of the world. It may be madness to beg forgiveness of the birds, but, then, it would be easier for the birds, and for the child, and for every animal if you were yourself more pleasant than you are now—just a little easier, anyhow. Everything is like an ocean, I tell you. Then you would pray to the birds, too, consumed by a universal love, as though in a sort of ecstasy, and pray that they, too, should forgive your sin. Set great store by this ecstasy, however absurd people may think it.⁸

Then, as a consequence to such embracing compassion, Zossima concludes by relating compassionate love to cosmic liturgy:

When you are left in solitude, pray. Love to fall upon the earth and kiss it. Kiss the earth ceaselessly and love it insatiably. Love all men, love everything, seek that rapture and ecstasy. Water the earth with the tears of your joy and love those tears. Be not ashamed of that ecstasy, prize it,

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Ibid., 376.

for it is a gift of God, a great gift, and it is not given to many, but only to the chosen ones.⁹

The world in its entirety forms an integral part of the liturgy. God is praised by the trees and by the birds, glorified by the stars and the moon (cf. Ps. 18:2), worshiped by the sea and the sand. There is a dimension of art, of music, and of beauty in the world. This world is the most inconspicuous and silent sermon declaring the word of God. Indeed, for all intents and purposes, since most of us may not fully contemplate the spiritual depth of things, it is also the clearest, most visible, and most tangible sermon declaring God's presence.

This means, however, that whenever we narrow life to ourselves—to our concerns and our desires—we neglect our vocation to reconcile and transform creation. And whenever we reduce our religious life to ourselves—to our concerns and our desires—we forget the function of the liturgy to implore God for the renewal of the whole polluted cosmos. 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.

Humanity, we now know, is *less than humanity* without the rest of creation. We may go further than this and declare that this world too is much more than a mere reflection or revelation of heaven; it is a fulfillment and completion of heaven. Heaven is *less than heaven* without this world. The earthly liturgy is not merely a con-celebration, but a completion of the heavenly dance. Just as we are incomplete without the rest of material and animal creation, so too the kingdom of God remains—daring and scandalous as it may seem—incomplete without the world around us. Not because of some inner or innate beauty and sacredness in the created world; but simply because that is how God chose to share the divine beauty and sacredness. How could we ever thank God enough for such a gift?

III. The Body of the World

Of course, this world does not always feel or even look like some sort of completion of heaven. In his letter to the Colossians, St. Paul writes:

⁹ Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamozov*, vol. 1, 379.

Through him [Christ], God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross (1:20).

Reference here to “the blood of the cross” is a clear indication, at least for Orthodox spirituality, of the cost involved. It reminds us of the reality of human failure and of the need for a cosmic repentance. In order to alter our self-image, what is required is nothing less than a radical reversal of our perspectives and attitudes, especially of our practices and life-styles. There is a price to pay for our wasting. It is the cost of self-discipline. The balance of the world has been ruptured; it is an “outstanding balance” that can only be countered by the sacrifice of bearing the cross. The environmental crisis will not be solved simply by sentimental expressions of regret or aesthetic formulations of imagination. It is the “tree of the cross” that reveals to us the way out of our ecological impasse by proposing the solution of—in theological terminology, this is called “salvation” through—self-denial, the denial of selfishness or self-centeredness. It is a spirit of asceticism that can lead to a spirit of gratitude and love, to the rediscovery of wonder and beauty in our relationship with the world.

The cross further raises the concept of asceticism or discipline of the heart and body as a way of relating to and reconciling with the world. For, the connection is intimate and profound between our body and our world. In the third century, Origen of Alexandria believed that:

The world is like our bodies. It too is formed of many limbs and directed by a single soul.¹⁰

If the earth is our very flesh, then it is also inseparable from our story, our destiny, and our God. For “no one ever hates one’s own flesh” (Eph. 5:29).

And the ascetic way is a way of liberation. And the ascetic is the person who is free, uncontrolled by attitudes that abuse the world; uncompelled by ways that use the

¹⁰ *On First Principles* II, I, 2-3 (PG 11:183).

world; characterized by self-control, by self-restraint, and by the ability to say “no” or “enough.” Asceticism, then, aims at refinement, not detachment or destruction. Its goal is moderation, not repression. Its content is positive, not negative: it looks to service, not selfishness; to reconciliation, not renunciation or escape. “Without asceticism, none of us is authentically human.”¹¹

Let us examine one particular aspect of asceticism in the Christian Orthodox spiritual practice, namely *fasting*. We Orthodox fast from all dairy and meat products for half of the entire year, almost as if in an effort to reconcile one half of the year with the other, secular time with the time of the kingdom. To fast is:

- not to deny the world, but to affirm the world, together with the body, as well as the material creation;
- to remember the hunger of others, identifying ourselves with—and not isolating ourselves from—the rest of the world;
- to feel the hunger of creation itself for restoration and transfiguration;
- to hunger for God, transforming the act of eating into nothing less than a sacrament;
- to remember that we live not “by bread alone” (Matt. 4:4), that there is a spiritual dimension to our life;
- to feast along with the entire world; for we Orthodox fast together, never alone or at whim.

To fast is to acknowledge that all of this world, “the earth, is the Lord’s, and all the fullness thereof” (Ps. 23:1). It is to affirm that the material creation is not under our control; it is not to be exploited selfishly, but is to be returned in thanks to God, restored in communion with God.

Therefore, to fast is to learn to give, and not simply to give up. It is not to deny, but in fact to offer, to learn to share, to connect with the natural world. It is beginning to break down barriers with my neighbor and my world, recognizing in others faces, icons;

¹¹ Cf. K. Ware, “The Way of the Ascetics: Negative or Affirmative,” in V. Wimbush and R. Valantasis (eds), *Asceticism* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 13.

and in the earth the face itself of God. Anyone who does not love trees does not love people; anyone who does not love trees does not love God.

To fast, then, is to love; it is to see more clearly, to restore the primal vision of creation, the original beauty of the world. To fast is to move away from what I want, to what the world needs. It is to be liberated from greed, control, and compulsion. It is to free creation itself from fear and destruction. Fasting is to value everything for itself, and not simply for ourselves. It is to regain a sense of wonder, to be filled with a sense of goodness, of God-liness. It is to see all things in God, and God in all things. The discipline of fasting is the necessary corrective for our culture of wasting. Letting go is the critical balance for our controlling; communion is the alternative for our consumption; and sharing is the only appropriate healing of the scarring that we have left on the body of our world, as well as on humanity as the body of God.

IV. Three Models of Caring for the Earth

Now, if our ecological prayer is gradually to begin moving from the distant periphery of an abstract theology to the center stage of practical ministry, if Orthodox spirituality is to become “incarnate,” then there are three models or approaches that may be recommended. These three approaches are complementary.

(i) The Biblical Model

According to this model, the Church must be in solidarity with the weakest part of creation. It must stand for the most vulnerable aspects of creation, the helpless or voiceless details of this world, which according to St. Paul “groan in travail, awaiting their liberation from the children of God” (Rom. 8:22). This implies a kind of cosmic “liberation theology”:

One member of the body cannot say to another, “I have no need of you.” On the contrary, those members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable ... and our less respectable members are treated with great respect (1 Cor. 12:20-25)

The earth is a member of our body, a part of our very flesh, inseparable from our story, our history, and our destiny. In the same way as the God of Israel once heard the cry of the poor and the oppressed (Ex. 3 and Jon. 4), God also now hears the cry of the earth—of the dumb creatures and of silent nature. This is the Biblical covenant, God’s promise to the people of Israel: God listens to the world; God attends to the created world; God tends to the details of this earth.

The inherent weakness of this biblical model is that it is all too often neglected. We tend to forget, to be faithless to both heaven and earth. And so, it must be complemented by a second model.

(ii) The Ascetic Model

Asceticism, as we have seen, is an appropriate corrective for the excess of our consumer society. We might imagine here the three “R”s of the ascetic life: renunciation, repentance, and responsibility.

- Renunciation is an ancient response—indeed, pre-Christian. It is also a universal response—even non-Christian (native, Aboriginal and Indian peoples know this very well). As we have seen, renunciation is a way of learning to share. It has social consequences; it reminds us to use material goods respectfully. Renunciation is about living simply and about simply living;
- Repentance is a return to a God-given life “according to nature.” In repentance, we confess that we do not share, that we are self-centered, that we in fact abuse the goods of the earth. Repentance is recognizing that we have fallen short of our vocation “to serve and preserve” (Gen. 2.15) the created environment;
- Responsibility is the challenge; it is the choice that we all have before us. Having renounced whatever clutters our mind and our life, and after repenting of our wastefulness, we can direct our lives in a manner that is at once reverent toward creation and its Creator.

One qualification needs to be made here, which constitutes also the inherent weakness of the ascetic model. Asceticism is not another, a “better” way of action, but in reality a way of inaction, of silence, and of vigilance. We are called to remember that the present ecological crisis is a result of our action—of considerable human effort, achievement, and “success”—and not just of greed, covetousness, or failure.

(iii) The Sacramental Model

We have already seen how community is brought to bear in liturgy. It is here that all things are received and shared as gifts. The weakness of this particular model comes at the level of practice. For many of us, liturgy is confined to ritual observance; it is not seen as a way of active engagement. Yet, the broken body of Christ is not a way of pious or individual inspiration. It is an imperative for sharing.

The sacraments, therefore, have an undeniable and indelible environmental seal.

- **Baptism:** In a world where water is polluted and wasted, baptism highlights the connection between the Spirit of God and “living water” that renews and sanctifies the face of the world;
- **Eucharist:** This sacrament is pregnant with possibilities of deepening our awareness of communion. It challenges us to work for a just society, where food is shared and everyone has enough;
- **Confession:** Reconciliation and forgiveness provide an opportunity—both as individuals and as communities—to focus on the wider implications of our actions on others and on the environment;
- **Ordination:** This sacrament is a reminder that the priesthood is the royal vocation of all people. We are all invited to celebrate the presence of God in every corner of “the cathedral of the universe”;
- **Chrismation:** Our personal invitation to “see Christ” and to recognize “the seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit” in all places of His dominion: in the face of all people and on the face of the world;
- **Holy Unction:** This is a way of pouring the “oil of gladness” of God on

the wounds or scars of the soul, of the body, of the earth, to heal the brokenness of our heart and the shattered image of our environment;

- Marriage: This celebration affirms the truth of the deeper unity between God and humanity, body and soul, matter and spirit, time and eternity, man and woman, heaven and earth.

Unfortunately, however, we have been alienated from the natural world; we have worshiped in a way that “spiritualized” or “de-materialized” nature and the sacraments. The natural world, indeed our very notion of sacrament, is not associated with the meaning of life. Yet liturgy is, literally speaking, vital. And in this way, the sacraments reconnect us to God and to the natural world, by drawing on its elements—water, bread, wine, oil, fire, light and darkness. The writers of the early Christian Church believed that Christ’s flesh was a sacrament (Ignatius of Antioch); indeed, they were convinced that our own flesh was a sacrament (Symeon the New Theologian); but also that the whole world was a sacrament (Maximus the Confessor).