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EVERY PART OF CREATION MATTERS

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Keynote presentation

***“Every part of creation matters”*: Struggling with climate crisis as Christian Churches**

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Introductory remarks

We live in an increasingly interconnected world which faces an endless series of crises, like the climate one. Some years ago, CEC’s Governing Board decided to establish a special thematic group to focus on Economic and Ecological Justice and Sustainable Future. The group was requested to look at creation theology, to undertake a critical analysis of the European sustainability policies, and to develop a document that may serve the dialogue both amongst the Member Churches and with the European institutions, on climate crisis. The result of this group, consisted of Protestant, Orthodox and Catholic Church representatives, was a book titled *Every Part of Creation Matters. A discussion paper*,¹ edited by the respected colleagues Kees Nieuwerth, Peter Pavlovic, and Adrian Shaw.

In this paper, after schematically overviewing certain secular and ecclesiastical initiatives against climate crisis, I will turn to the more theological part of the document, highlighting its relevance for the need of a paradigm-shift in the way of doing theology today.

Climate Crisis as a global crisis

Climate crisis is considered nowadays as the most urgent threat facing humanity, consisted of a variety of dimensions, such as CO2 emissions, global warming beyond 1.5.C, large-scale shifts in weather patterns, etc.

Rooted in a selfish interpretation, that dominated after the Enlightenment, of the biblical account of creation,² humanity has assumed a controlling role and position within the world. As the document put it, this was “an egotistical worldview promoting dominance over nature through progress, prosperity, material possessions, and power.” (12)

¹ Geneva: Globethics.net, 2022.

² *Gen.*, chapters 1-2; for instance: 2,15: “The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.”

It was only in 1967 that Lynn White Jr.³ highlighted perhaps for the first time, the historical responsibility of Christianity, thus bringing to the fore the spiritual and religious dimension of the ecological problem against the prevailing till today economic and political. Since then creation care, ecological justice, but primarily the role of human beings in causing the climate crisis have been intensively studied, in an attempt to form a common voice and vision that would account for the salvation of creation.

Recent secular initiatives

In recent years, certain important initiatives have been undertaken by global community to address the problem. Among them, one should refer to the “Paris Agreement” of 2015. Among its ambitious decisions were to “holding the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels and pursuing efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels, recognizing that this would significantly reduce the risks and impacts of climate change.”⁴

In a similar vein, the “European Green Deal-towards a climate neutral EU by 2050,” critically discussed in the second part of CEC’s discussion paper, suggests certain and deeply transformative policies (e.g. modernization of the European economy, supplying clean and affordable energy, mobilizing industry for a clean economy, building in an energy and resource efficient way, etc.) for a sustainable future, taking into account, at least in principle, to not leave someone behind (“just transition”).⁵

Religious initiatives

Not only governmental bodies or transnational organizations but also Christian Churches decided to align their efforts to address climate crisis. One should give special attention to Pope Francis’ Encyclical “Laudatio Si’,” (2015) which appeals to “a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet. We need a conversation which includes everyone, since the environmental challenge we are undergoing, and its human roots, concern and affect us all.”⁶

In the same direction one can also refer to the *Joint Statement* of Pope Francis, Patriarch Bartholomew, and Archbishop of Canterbury, (2021), which “call(s) on everyone, whatever their belief or worldview, to endeavour to listen to the cry of the earth and of people who are poor...”⁷

³ Cf his Lynn White, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” *Science* 155 (1967): 1203-1207.

<https://www.cmu.ca/faculty/gmatties/lynwhiterootsofcrisis.pdf> (last accesses September 6, 2023).

⁴ “The Paris Agreement, November 5, 2022, https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/english_paris_agreement.pdf

⁵ “European Green Deal,” November 7, 2022, https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_en

⁶ “Laudato Si’,” November 2, 2022, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html

For an Orthodox reception on the Encyclical see Metropolitan John Zizioulas, “Pope Francis’ Encyclical Laudato Si’,” in *Ecotheology, Climate Justice and Food Security*, ed. Dietrich Werner-Elizabeth Geglitz (Geneva: Globethics.net, 2016), 179-186.

⁷ “Joint statement, Pope Francis, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and Archbishop of Canterbury urge care for future of the planet,” November 1, 2022, <https://bit.ly/3ctM68e> For an Orthodox assessment of

Furthermore, one should not forget the various pioneering initiatives undertaken by the Ecumenical Patriarchate organizing international meetings and scientific ecological conferences, issuing encyclicals and cultivating a certain spiritual ethos against climate crisis.⁸

The theological tenets of the text

Let's now turn to the CEC discussion paper, pointing out its basic theological dimensions which account for a *green* reception of doctrinal orthodoxy.

Deep Christology: Christ as the savior of the entire world:

It is well-known that the clauses “without confusion” and “without division,” of the Chalcedonian Definition,⁹ describe the relationship between God and humanity in Christ. The “without division” highlights the necessity of real communion at the ontological level in order to avoid both the self-referentiality of creation and death. The former (“without confusion”) guarantees freedom, personal otherness and the dignity of the two realities. The two concepts mediated in Christ, in whom communion and otherness coincide. Christ's resurrection offers the whole of creation salvation and a definitive victory over death. But still, is this perception of the relation between created and uncreated in Christ sufficient to deal with the catastrophic consequences of climate crisis? It seems that another, and more advanced step is required here which construes Christology in a more “green” way.

At the heart of the “deep incarnation” perspective, is a fresh reception and interpretation of doctrinal orthodoxy. It stress the importance of both fleshliness (materiality) and human consciousness in Christ. Thus, it tries to combine the biology of growth, vulnerability, decay and finally death, which characterize created order, with religious awareness, creation in its entirety and Jesus as a human individual, as a complete human being. In this respect, deep incarnation focuses not only on the person of Jesus, his personal history, but takes into consideration also the human, natural and cultural environment of Jesus in its entirety.

According to Niels Henrik Gregersen, deep incarnation was not particularly about evolutionary thinking. It had to do primarily about ecological thinking. In other words, it reflects on how to rescue a flourishing and inhabitable planet from too linear and narrow, too anthropomonic ways of thinking. Besides, deep incarnation refers to the

the statement see my “Un messaggio congiunto per la tutela del creato. Una riflessione ortodossa orientale,” *Concilium* 58, no. 3 (2022): 151-155.

⁸ For an overview see: Nikolaos Asproulis, “For the life of the world”: Insights from the eco-praxis and eco-theology of Eastern Orthodox Christianity, in Raimundo Barreto, Wanderley Pereira da Rosa, Graham McGeoch (eds.) *World Christianity and Ecological Theologies*, the sixth volume of the series entitled *World Christianity and Public Religion*, Fortress Press - forthcoming).

⁹ For the *Horos* of Chalcedon see

https://earlychurchtexts.com/main/chalcedon/chalcedonian_definition.shtml accessed November 10, 2022.

divine assumption of the full ecospace (and not only of humanity) of the cosmos in its entirety.¹⁰

Although protestant in its modern roots, deep incarnation represents the common tradition of the undivided church, by which it gives to Christ the proper attention as the only mediator between created and uncreated, as the only person who assumed the fullness of cosmic materiality and fleshiness, finally as the only condition for the entire planet to be ontologically saved. Without going into full details here, one can certainly refer to the well-known saying by Gregory Nazianzus, according to which “what has not been assumed, has not been healed.”¹¹ The meaning of the saying is clear: God became in Jesus not only just fully human (not to say just man) but a complete created being, since he entered the created order to save the whole creation from corruption and death. In a similar vein one can appeal to Maximus the Confessor’s doctrine of the *Logos* and *logoi*¹² of creation. According to this doctrine, everything that exists bears within itself a *logos*, by which it enters into a constant dialogue (and cooperation) with its source, the *Logos* of God. In this line one can clearly argue that everything participates to some extent in the divine, without however the ontological break between created and uncreated to be naturally overcome. Panentheism (different from pantheism) must be also understood in this same Christological direction of deep incarnation, where “God (i.e. Christ) is found in all things, yet at the same time is beyond and above all things.”¹³

***Creatio ex nihilo*: “The world does not belong to us and we are not its master” (12)**

A fundamental question related to the biblical story of creation, ultimately revolves around the proper understanding of *creation* itself. By emphasizing “*creatio ex nihilo*” (21ff.) one makes clear that the world is not eternal. If the world was eternal it would not need to be created, and if it was not created from nothing, then the world was created from something that has some other existence. This is clearly a reversal of the ancient view and leads to the conclusion that “existence is the fruit of freedom”¹⁴. The doctrine of creation out of nothing has clear ecological implications. Insofar as the world is considered of as a gift of God, then any dualism that undermines the dignity of the world’s materiality is excluded. The fact that the world was created out of nothing and is not eternal means that there is also the possibility to return to nothing and cannot live eternally on its own right. On the other hand, if creation is a gift, then it by no means possesses any natural or other means to guarantee eternal survival. This is an uncontested reality nowadays, when the environmental crisis threatens the very sustainability and the future of the planet in its entirety. It is sufficient here to refer to the expanding global warming and the radical consequences of climate change for

¹⁰ Niels Gregersen, *Deep Incarnation: God's Redemptive Suffering With Creatures*, Orbis books 2019, passim.

¹¹ Gregory Nazianzus, “Epistle 101,” PG 37,181.

¹² See Torstein Theodor Tollefsen, *The Christocentric Cosmology of St Maximus the Confessor*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2008), 64-137.

¹³ Nikolaos Asproulis, “Metropolitan Kallistos Ware of Diokleia, between the Neo-patristic synthesis and the Russian Religious Renaissance: an example of the reception of the patristic tradition,” *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church*, 19, no. 4, (2019): 212-229.

¹⁴ John Zizioulas, *Communion & Otherness*, (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 255.

biodiversity and the survival of all creatures, in order to realize that our world as such, is, today as never before, under the yoke of death. *Creatio ex nihilo* grants to the world a unique value, brings to the fore its innate dignity. By doing so, the Christian view differs from other cosmological views like emanation developed in Far East spirituality, based on the conviction of a full identification between God and the world. The Christian doctrine of the *creatio ex nihilo* emphasizes the fragility and uniqueness of the finite world understood as a living organism that requires a constant relationship with God to live eternally.

Imago Dei as Imago Mundi

The time has come to turn to Christian anthropology and its possible re-definition from an ecological perspective. According to the text “the biblical story of creation became an instrument granting the human being the position of unrestricted lord of the earth. The critical ecological situation we face nowadays is, to a large extent, the result of a human perception defining its relationship to creation in terms of superiority, manipulation, possession and domination.” (28) As it has been stated by Pope Francis in his *Laudato Si*, “Modernity has been marked by an excessive anthropocentrism.” (as cited in CEC’s paper, 29). If that is the case a necessary “shift from the direction of an excessive anthropocentric stance to considerations of an inclusive planetary justice and solidarity” (30) is badly needed. To this end a redefinition of the image of God in a more inclusive ways through the lens of a personalist ontological view is required by a com-passionate theology which express its concern for creation in its entirety. This is so as “ecological challenges cannot be solved without looking at how to interpret human identity.” (30) If one defines the human from the standpoint of a personalist, relational ontology,¹⁵ then the human cannot be understood without a clear reference, relation and connection to a You, and an It: “Every part of creation matters,”¹⁶ or every single creature of God matters: *Imago Dei* is incomplete, unless the whole creation is recognized as being a constitutive part of it. Again patristic tradition is quite illuminating here: In his effort to address the role of the body in attaining the divine light against the accusations against him of that time (14th c.), Gregory Palamas argues that “every kind of creature, as he himself participates in everything and is also able to participate in the one who lies above everything, in order for the image of God to be completed.”¹⁷

Such an inclusive understanding of *imago Dei* points, perhaps unconsciously, to the concept of *imago mundi*. By this, contemporary theologians¹⁸ attempt to re-define human identity in light of the urgent climate crisis. If the image of God in human cannot fully manifest, without taking into account, all creatures, this clearly means that fauna

¹⁵ I follow here John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion. Studies in Personhood and the Church* (New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985).

¹⁶ See Kees Nieuwerth, Peter Pavlovic, and Adrian Shaw (eds.) *Every part of Creation matters*, CEC Series No. 8 (Geneva: Globethics.net, 2022).

¹⁷ Gregory Palamas, “Against Akindynos,” 7, 11, 36. 25-8.

¹⁸ As Moltmann puts it “Before human beings are an *imago Dei*, they are an *imago mundi*, a microcosm in which all previous life forms are integrated,” in his *Hope in These Trouble Times* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2010), 19. Cf. also A.C., Rabie-Boshoff, “*Imago mundi*: Justice of peace,” *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 78 no. 2, (2022): 1-7.

and flora, as well as the whole creation, do share in the salvation of the whole creation. After all this is the ultimate goal of the divine plan: the salvation of the entire world, not only of humanity. Otherwise, the non-human creation would have been created in vain (“Man and beast thou savest, O Lord” (Ps. 36:6b), and the Pauline premises that the whole earth will be saved, and Christ would “unite all things in Him, things in heaven and things on earth” (Eph. 1:9-10) would sound irrelevant.

Towards an eco-spirituality and eco-ethos: From mere *steward* to *priest of creation*

As the text put it, the secular definition of stewardship refers to the “responsibility for sustainable development shared by all those whose actions affect environmental performance, economic activity, etc.,” (45) including thus not only ecological, social but also economic dimensions. From a religious perspective though, this is not sufficient, as it limits human behavior and relationship to the created order, in other words to a utilitarian perspective, excluding the transcendent God as a fundamental factor in this respect. According to the common Christian tradition of the past, human being functions as the “bridge” between God and creation. Against the prevailing understanding of the *imago Dei* as chiefly referring to the human mind (*ratio*), the Greek Fathers especially offer a different perception, from the point of view of freedom. According to this understanding freedom should be considered as “the ability to affirm or deny the very existence of something [...] to either destroy creation or affirm its existence.”¹⁹ The current ecological crisis clearly highlights the relevance of such an understanding of human freedom. To be clear, contemporary currents of theology credit Darwinism (not always without reservations) and modern Quantum physics for highlighting the innate interconnection or rather ontological interdependence between humanity, creatures and the whole earth. Human being is nothing but an animal, an “autexousion animal” though “with a difference of degree, but not of kind,”²⁰ to other creatures. It is due to freedom that human being possesses the capacity to “transcend the limitations of nature to the point of denying nature itself or anything given.”²¹ It is exactly here that human’s role as *priest of creation* rather than a mere steward emerges. In Eucharist humanity undertakes this priestly role acting in the place of God himself, by offering the creation in its entirety to God the Father, so as to gain eternal life. This renders human being an indispensable part of creation endowed with eco-responsibility and eco-justice, in contrast to certain secular ecological views that deprive humanity altogether from its role and responsibility in saving creation. As the text put it “what is needed, along with an emphasis on respect and humility in the context of creation, is an acknowledgment that humanity has the particular role and responsibility to take care of the earth” while a particular “accent on humanity’s accountability and responsibility in caring for the world and creating from the world a common home for all” (33-34) must be worked out.

By way of conclusion

¹⁹ John Zizioulas, “Creation Theology: An Orthodox Perspective,” in John Chryssavgis and Nikolaos Asproulis (eds.) *Priests of Creation: John Zizioulas on Discerning an Ecological Ethos*, (London: T&T Clark, 2021), 41.

²⁰ Ibid, 42.

²¹ Ibid.



Climate crisis is not something to deal with in a managerial way. As the ultimate evil of our era, it should be clearly seen as an existential and spiritual problem, or rather as an “ecological sin,” the fruit of human beings’ disobedience to God’s commandment to “preserve and take care” of the planet. We live in a critical time, where radical action is required against our egocentric lifestyle and consumerist culture that prevents us from finding a real meaning in life. To this end we need a theology that undertakes the risk to closely work and cooperate with environmental sciences, and ecology, and by deeply diving in its own tradition and by using an *ecothological-hermeneutic* to bring to the fore those elements necessary to address climate crisis. Both the long history of the Church and the recent religious and secular initiatives are nothing more than an attempt to cope with ecological evil and the disorder caused to creation. CEC’s paper must be considered as an attempt towards this end, a text of major importance for our common Christian witness.