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Seeing the wood for the trees, Christianity and the ecological crisis (Archimandrite Vassilios Papavassiliou)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



In recent times, the ecological crisis has been brought increasingly to our attention. Scientists, the media, Hollywood, thrash metal bands, and a horde of environmentalists from politicians to tree-hugging hippies and pseudo-Buddhists, have all had their say. But there is one voice on environmental issues that seems to only speak in hushed tones, and this is the voice of Christianity. Some people claim that Christianity, far from being concerned about environmental issues, is the prime culprit for the ecological crisis. These people point to the creation of the first human beings in the book of Genesis, where God says to the first-formed: "...fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth". The Christian religion, so these people claim, has given humanity not only the freedom, but also the command, to do as he pleases with the natural environment.



Photo: Spyros Drosos

Two rebuttals to this view should be made. First of all, it seems odd that it is only Christianity that is picked out as the scapegoat, given it is the Old Testament that is used as the basis for the criticism. Why not blame Judaism as well? Perhaps that would just be too politically incorrect. It is open season on Christianity, not Judaism. Secondly, and more importantly, it is a criticism of astounding ignorance. Only a few lines up from the above verse, it is quite explicit that everything God creates is proclaimed as “very good”, and that means good in itself, not good inasmuch as it is useful to man. Many of the psalms praise the beauty and wisdom of God’s creation, and throughout the Old and New Testaments, the natural world is considered and used to instruct human beings in how to live and behave and consider the God who created all of these things. One of the great errors of modernist Christians is that they consider many of these images and parables (the lilies of the field or the birds of the air; bread and wine; a sower and his seeds; a winepress etc.) to be out of date or, at any rate, irrelevant to most of us city-dwellers, and that modern images – more relevant, they think, to our times – should supersede them. But through the natural world, God has given us a map and guide for instruction.

Forgetting these images, albeit often images relating to a life-style which few, if any, of us are now familiar with at first hand, could have drastic ramifications for how we understand pastoral teachings and theological truths. But here we are

moving away from the point. The point I am trying to make is that Christianity has always had a great affinity with the natural world. Furthermore, Christianity has fought for its belief in the sanctity of the physical world, be that the human body, sacred images or the natural environment. Does this mean that Christianity should be bleating on about the ecological crisis and shouting it from the rooftops? Not all Christians will agree with me, but I think no, we should certainly not do that. The reason is that this response to the ecological crisis displays an approach to the natural environment that is alien to the Christian ethos. There is a significant difference between 'Christian environmentalism' and any other kind of environmentalism, be it 'secular' or 'religious'. What are the characteristics of the non-Christian view?:

- 1) The 'crisis' in the ecological crisis lies in the fear, be it founded or not, that through our misuse of the world, we will destroy the world and ourselves with it.
- 2) The 'salvation' of the natural environment falls to man. He alone has the power to determine not only his own fate but also that of the natural environment. Far from Christianity being the one that surrenders nature to the arbitrary will and power of humanity, it is the non-Christian view that does this with astounding self-righteousness.

The Christian view is quite different: As a psalm goes: "...He [God] has established the world that it shall never be moved", and we read in the book of Revelations: "I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away". "Saving the planet" is not a goal of Christianity, although a great number of Christians these days seem to think that it is. Many Christians talk about this new heaven and new earth as though it will be man-made, and not one that will be established by God Himself. Despite popular opinion, Christianity does not believe in "the end of the world", but the "renewal", or the "transfiguration" of the world. If we are to talk about the end of the world, we should be clear that we are talking also about the beginning of a new one. If Christianity has this unshakably optimistic faith that, whatever we do, it will all work out okay in the end, can and should Christianity say anything about environmental issues? I would say that Christianity has no need to say anything. The Christian response entails action, a certain way of life and a unique view of the material world, and this view can best be described as 'sacramental'. The main characteristic of a sacrament is that humanity takes natural material (water, bread, wine, oil) and offers it back to God while asking Him to make it a means of imparting His grace and mercy to us. The natural world, in this way, becomes 'supernatural'. Far from nature being a means to man's own selfish ends, it becomes a means of grace, thanksgiving and salvation. The Christian is capable of delighting in the natural world in a way that

no one else can. Furthermore, we do not simply use raw materials. We use our creative powers to fashion them into something different to what they were at first. At the Eucharist, for example, we do not offer wheat and grapes, but bread and wine. Man's use of the world is creative, but creative with the purpose of offering it back to the Creator in thanksgiving and praise, much in the same way that a child takes paper and crayons from his parents to draw a picture of them and give it back to them with delight. The basis of the sacraments and of the Christian Faith as a whole is that God Himself became part of the natural world through His Incarnation. After His Death and Resurrection, Christ ascended into heaven, which means that He took human nature into heaven to God the Father, to Paradise, and that is the final destination of the physical world, not only of us humans, but of the whole created universe. On a more practical level, there is within Christianity an ascetical spirit, manifesting itself through fasting, prayer, charity and self-denying love. Perhaps the best response to the ecological crisis would be an ascetical spirit of love, restraint, prayer and self-sacrifice, and a theological outlook of the world, which sees in all of God's creation an image of its Creator, and delights in it.