

Sacred Cosmology in the Christian Tradition

The Ecologist, Jan, 2000.

“Where is the life we have lost in living; where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge; where is the knowledge we have lost in information?”— T.S. Eliot

These three poignant questions, penned by T.S. Eliot over a half-century ago, point us directly at the problem of the Christian view of the Creation as we face the new millennium. The Christian conscience has lost its ancient wisdom, and needs to recover it, as an essential and indispensable part of its life.

The Recovery of Christian Cosmology

Many people today are calling for modern religion, and specifically Christianity, to be re-embedded in the cosmos, so that religion might become a real force in providing the ethical and spiritual energy for the critical task of reversing the degradation of the Earth. A study of the roots of the living Christian tradition reveals that the sense of ‘embeddedness’ in Creation was a very real part of the overall experience of the religion. The early Church, especially in its Greek or Eastern half, but also in the West, transmitted a fully ‘cosmic’ faith.

The great saints and sages of the early Church, in their writings, implicitly recognise a fundamental truth, as expressed by G. K. Chesterton: “Religion is not the church a man goes to but the cosmos he lives in.” Chesterton also observed pointedly that “The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult, and left untried.”[1] The point of this observation applies as much to the role of Christianity in relinking the Christian to Creation as it does to the more individualistic concerns relative to the salvation of the soul. Indeed, taken to its fullest meaning, the cosmic dimension so characteristic of Eastern Christianity implies that the salvation of the Christian’s soul is directly linked to the manner in which he or she responds to Creation. Far from being

‘anthropocentric’, the Orthodox Christian Tradition, throughout its 2,000 year history presents a world-view that is ‘theoanthropocosmic’.[2]

Religion’s Divorce from the Cosmos

If this ‘God-, Man- and Cosmos-centred’ world-view was so central to the early Church, how did we lose sight of it? While it is not the purpose of this article to rehearse the question of how Western religion got itself divorced from the cosmos, we cannot avoid touching upon it, however briefly.

The root of the ecological crisis, according to Philip Sherrard, is ultimately theological. More specifically, it is a theological interpretation of the relationship between God and Creation that separates the created order from the Divine reality in such a way as to remove from Creation all spiritual value and leave only material processes and ‘resources’ to be exploited.

The path towards the recovering of the integrity of Creation has been laid out in a number of significant statements from the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, of which the following is a good example:

“We must recognise the failure of all anthropocentric ideologies, which have created in men and women of this century a spiritual void and an existential insecurity, and have led many people to seek salvation in new religious and parareligious movements, sects, or nearly idolatrous attachments to the material values of this world. Similar are the dangers for the survival of the natural environment. The careless and self-indulgent use of material creation by man, with the help of scientific and technological progress, has al-

ready started to cause irreparable destruction to the natural environment. The Orthodox Church, not being able to remain passive in the face of such destruction, invites [us] to dedicate the first day of September of each year, the day of the beginning of the ecclesiastical year, to the offering of prayers and supplications for the preservation of God's creation and the adoption of the attitude to nature involved in the Eucharist and ascetic tradition of the Church.”[3]

What I wish to suggest in this article is a way to recover the lost cosmic dimension of religion by showing how it might be found again in the Christian tradition. What must be recovered above all is the vision— not only that religion needs to be imbedded in the cosmos, but also that the world is imbedded in God. For it is this loss that inevitably led to the separation of religion from the natural order. In the words of Philip Sherrard:

“There is a relationship of interdependence, interpenetration, and reciprocity between God, Man, and Creation; and it is the loss by the Christian consciousness of awareness of the full significance of this relationship that is a basic cause of today's ecological crisis. Correspondingly, if the Christian Church is to offer a positive response to the challenge of this crisis, it can only be through reaffirmation of the full significance of this relationship.”[4]

Man's Divorce from Nature

If the root of this alienation of human nature from the natural order is theological, its tragic fruit has penetrated deeply into all aspects of modern society— political, economic, social, cultural and individual. But it is extremely difficult not to envisage even positive activities in terms that remain separating, alienating and abstracting. By the term 'environment' we usually mean 'the natural world', or, to use religious language, 'Creation'. But if we look critically at the word 'environment', we will sense a certain abstract quality to it. It separates human nature from non-human nature, and turns non-human nature into an abstraction— something which we believe can be manipulated and controlled for our purposes.

Even with the best of intentions, we have created and are sustaining, a division between the natural world and ourselves— a division that is at the very root of all environmental problems.

As Wendell Berry, poet, essayist and farmer, writes:

“Abstraction, of course, is what is wrong. The evil of the industrial economy (capitalist or communist) is the abstractness inherent in its procedures— its inability to distinguish one place or person or creature from another.

The right scale in work gives power to affection. When one works beyond the reach of one's love for the place one is working in and for the creatures one is working with and among, then destruction inevitably results. An adequate local culture, among other things, keeps work within the reach of love.

The question before us, then, is an extremely difficult one: How do we begin to remake... what will preserve our part of the world while we use it? We are talking not just about a kind of knowledge that involves affection but also about a kind of knowledge that comes from or with affection— knowledge... that is unavailable to anyone in the form of 'information'.”

The Original Christian World-view

A study of the lives and writings of the great spiritual masters of the First Millennium of the Christian Church— East and West— will show that a sacred cosmology was integral to the Church's world-view. Salvation, or deification, as the ancient Church and the Orthodox Church of today calls the process of reconciliation with God, was cosmic as well as personal in scope. It included not only human beings but also everything else in the universe, through the reciprocal relationship of the human microcosm with the macrocosm of the created order.

The self-understanding of the ancient Church— the united Christian faith of the first thousand years— shows a complex and subtle relationship between Church and cosmos. For the sacred cosmology of the early Church— the traces or vestiges of which still can be found in the Orthodox Church today— showed that not only was the Church imbedded in the cosmos, but that the cosmos was imbedded in the Church.

St. Maximos the Confessor describes the teaching of his own spiritual master (to whom he refers as “the great elder”) on the Church:

“On a second level of contemplation, he [the great elder] used to speak of God's Holy Church as a figure and image [ikon] of the entire cosmos, composed of visible and invisible essences, because, like it, it contains unity and diversity... in this way the entire world of beings produced by God in creation is divided into a spiritual world filled with intelligible and incorporeal essences and into this sensible and bodily world which is ingeniously woven together of many forms and natures.”

In the new order inaugurated by the Incarnation of Christ, the Church is the new cosmos. The Church is the Body of Christ, which is the new creation. As such, the Church is the destiny of the cosmos. The Church is the cosmos becoming itself, what it truly is to be— its end— as intended by God. The mission of the Church is the mission of Christ, which is

the reconciliation, unification and glorification, not only of human beings, but of all things in the universe.

But how can this knowledge become an effective force for protecting God's Creation? This challenge is a form of asking how the knowledge of a cosmically-enlightened ancient tradition actually gives believers the power to transform our world. How, in short, in the Christian tradition does information become knowledge, become wisdom, become transfigured life? The answer to that challenge lies in the nature and method of Christian spiritual practice. The art of Christian Creation-keeping is an aspect of the Christian spiritual way.

Logos and Creation

The fundamental cosmic intuition of the Christian spiritual path is that creation is the manifestation of an order that at one and the same time transcends it, sustains it from within and manifests itself through it. This intrinsic, transcendent, immanent order is the Logos— the eternal son of God. The term 'Logos' in Christian theology marries, through the revelation of St. John's Gospel and the Epistles of Paul, its Greek philosophical meaning of an all-encompassing rational order uniting nature, society, individual humans and divinity into 'a great cosmos'[5] with the Christian theological meaning of Christ, the Word (Logos) of God, in, through and by whom all things are created and "in whom we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). It is thus the supreme ordering principle uniting all levels of being, from the sublimity of the Divine to the deepest density of the mineral kingdom.

According to three great Christian masters of cosmological vision, St. Ephrem the Syrian (306-373), Dionysius the Areopagite (circa 500) and Maximos the Confessor (580-662), the reciprocal imbeddedness of cosmos and Church is grounded in the primordial imbeddedness of all creation in God.

St. Ephrem the Syrian

St. Ephrem the Syrian was a great theologian, and one of the greatest writers in the Syriac language, as the following excerpt from one of his hymns shows.

"As the water surrounds the fish and it feels it,
So also do all natures feel God.
He is diffused through the air,
And with thy breath enters into thy midst.
He is mingled with the light,
And enters, when thou seest, into thy eyes.
He is mingled with thy spirit,
And examines thee from within, as to what thou art.
In thy soul He dwells ..."

Ephrem here represents God as the water, and all creatures as sea creatures. Just like the sea, God both contains and transcends his creatures. He is not only over all things, but

also in and around and embracing all things. The separation implied in Divine transcendence never nullifies the unity implied in Divine immanence.

St. Dionysius the Areopagite

St. Dionysius the Areopagite lived in the late fifth or early sixth century. He was a great Christian neoplatonic philosopher, ascetic and speculative genius. Dionysius completes the picture or world-image of the traditional Christian cosmology.[6]

His most important contribution is undoubtedly his concept of hierarchy in the cosmos. Dionysius is, as far as we know, the first person in literature ever to have used the word 'hierarchy'. He seems to have coined the term. This profoundly Orthodox Christian concept is vital for a conception of the cosmos that includes not only the beings and activities of the visible world but also the 'invisible' world; beings and activity of the subtle, celestial or angelic worlds, not susceptible of scientific measurement, yet part of the order of created nature.

"A hierarchy is a sacred order, a state of understanding and an activity approximating as closely as possible to the Divine." [7] What does Dionysius mean by "approximating as closely as possible to the Divine"? His very next sentence gives the explanation: "It is uplifted to the imitation of God in proportion to the enlightenments divinely given to it."

According to Dionysius, then, the order, understanding and activity of the hierarchically-ordered cosmos is the sanctifying beauty of the Divine image, revealed simultaneously in the being, in the knowing of and in the activity of the hierarchy. A hierarchy, then, contrary to the popular Church notion, is not a 'chain of command'; or an organisational chart representing a system of authority that is imposed from above upon a mass of individuals who are not part of the authority structure. To Dionysius, the sacred concept of hierarchy applied not only to the world of angels but to the world of visible nature. To quote from his treatise on the Church, the priesthood and the sacraments, *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*:

"We have a venerable sacred tradition which asserts that every hierarchy is the complete expression of the sacred elements comprised within it. It is the perfect total of all its sacred constituents. Our own hierarchy is therefore said to embrace every one of its sacred constituents. Talk of 'hierarch' and one is referring to a holy and inspired man, someone who understands all sacred knowledge, someone in whom an entire hierarchy is completely perfected and known."

[8]

In other words, the created order itself— the universe— in the Dionysian conception, is a God-given means of fulfilment,

salvation and transfiguration for all its constituent parts or members. This is to say that human beings cannot be ‘saved’ without ‘saving’ the Creation. In Orthodox Christian terms, without the transfiguration of the cosmos, there is no ‘deification’ of human beings. Central to this, is the crucial insight that the purpose of the created order is “to enable beings to be as like as possible to God and to be at one with Him.” In the understanding of the ancient Church, the universe, far from being either an illusion or a vast mindless material force, is a Divine revelation and a sacred means of salvation, enlightenment and ‘at-one-ment’.

St. Maximos the Confessor

1,400 years ago, St. Maximos the Confessor (580-662) brought the ‘Logos’ paradigm to new heights, creating an unsurpassed synthesis showing that all are representatives of one simple and supreme principle, the Logos Principle which underlies the deep structure of the cosmos.

For Maximos, the perennial integrity paradigm of the cosmos was self-evident. It was the Church as the cosmic ‘living symbol’; the house of all horizons and perspectives. The Logos is the eternal, which understands, explains and encompasses all. In the words of St. Paul: “In him, we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28).

The essence of this notion, which Maximos termed *diakosmesis* is this: all we know about humanity and all we know about the universe are reciprocal. This means that how we see the world depends upon how we see ourselves; and, equally, how we see ourselves depends upon how we see the world. The model we have of the universe depends upon our view of ourselves. This means that we live in a participatory universe of incorporeal and corporeal light where the observer and the observed are intertwined and interactive.

This principle is enshrined in Genesis, Chapter One, where we are taught that God made humanity in His own image and likeness as microcosm and mediator. The image is the perfection of all nature, and our nature as God intended; the likeness is the actual state of our nature; the distance between the image of nature— the way God made it— and the likeness of nature— what we have done with it— is the source of all disorder and disharmony in the world.

If there is dissonance in this liturgy, it stems from any paradigm of thought or action which enshrines the unnatural disorder and distance between the way things really are according to the Divine creative will; the end to which they are intended (teleology), and what we have made of them and the end to which we actually put them (economy/ecology). There is nothing in the principle of *diakosmesis* that is superseded by any technological development of the present, including computers and the ‘information revolution’ that

would necessitate an all-out effort to find or declare a new paradigm.

St. Maximos, Liturgising the World

Let us consider the cosmological and ecological functions of liturgy: the act of liturgising the world. The word liturgy is from the Greek *leitourgia*, which literally means the ‘work of the people’. The Byzantine Church of St. Maximos’ time recognised liturgy as the *topos*, or place, of the direct link between human knowing and ethical action, with the well-being of the cosmos and the metaphysical transparency of things. The insight that the cosmos itself is a vast liturgy is a revelation of the cosmological dimension to the liturgy of the Church.

This *theoria* (contemplation), itself the fruit of natural contemplation (or *physiki*, in Maximian terminology[9]), leads St. Maximos the Confessor to interpret the Divine Liturgy of the Byzantine Church as sacred cosmology in action. We can clearly see this conception fully expressed in St. Maximos’ commentary on the Divine Liturgy, the *Mystagogia*. It starts with a section where he presents his image of the universe as a living symbol in which God, the Church, the cosmos, Holy Scripture and humanity are presented as icons— or reciprocal symbols— of one another. He then interprets the actions of the rite of the *synaxis* (or holy communion) in terms, not only of the life of Christ, but more specifically in relation to the goal of Creation, and most of all, in accordance with the ethical, ascetical, contemplative and mystical transformation of the human soul.

The third section is a contemplation that unites the human image, the image of the cosmos, and the Divine image in and through the Primordial Sacrifice of the Logos. Because the human image and the cosmic image are reciprocal in the thought of the Byzantine spiritual master, the inner constitution and condition of the human soul or microcosmos will be seen to have a direct effect on the outer condition and order of the universe or macrocosmos.

Clearly, St. Maximos understands liturgy to be the attainment of authentic being in knowledge and virtue, leading to ‘knowledge’, or the identity of knower and known in the experience of truth. This in return leads to ‘love’, or harmony of being and knowing and doing in Man and to peace (*hesychia*), or fulfilment of the destiny of Man, in which his deification or salvation and the transfiguration of nature are one and the same experience. To St. Maximos the Confessor, authentic liturgy is sacred cosmology in action. The field of the action is the human person as microcosmos, united reciprocally to the macrocosmos, the universe as a whole.

But even the cosmos as a whole is not seen as the spiritually empty universe of astrophysicists and evolutionists, but the universe understood liturgically and reciprocally as a Cosmic

Man.[11] “The whole world, made up of visible and invisible things, is Man, and conversely... Man, made up of body and soul, is a world.”

The action of liturgy is twofold: first, the reconstitution of ordinary space and time into liturgical space and time, wherein the valences of eternity are manifest, as Blake’s “infinity in a grain of sand and eternity in an hour.” Second, the transfiguration of human nature by uniting mind, heart, will, soul and body into wholeness, which results in a person whose faculties are energised and oriented toward truth, goodness and beauty in self, neighbour and Earth. This cannot but result in a person capable of genuinely feeling the wrongness of the ongoing destruction of the environment.

Enlightened and empowered by liturgy, Mankind’s true work in the world, such a person is thus capable as well of responding with ethical and practical effectiveness toward making the necessary sacrifice that will lead to healing and harmony in person and cosmos.

Liturgy, in its authentically Orthodox sense, is the transfiguration of nature (not just human nature but all nature) through the living symbolism of the sacramental act, which unites man and woman, this present world and paradise, earth and heaven, the sensible and intelligible dimensions of creation in its totality, and, ultimately, the Creation and the Uncreated.

In the conception of St. Maximos, which is the view of ancient traditional Christianity, the liturgy is the Divinely ordained work of the people in which the essence of religion and science is fully embedded in the cosmos because the cosmos is fully embedded in God. Through such liturgy, both the universe as macrocosm and the individual human being as microcosm are transformed, transfigured and deified. This transfiguration and deification is the ultimate destiny of both cosmos and man. Liturgy as sacred cosmology in action is able to accomplish this because of its essence; the communication of and communion with the Archetypal Sacrifice; the very foundation of the universe.

The heart of liturgy is sacrifice, and the purpose of sacrifice is to make holy. Liturgy was conceived as the primary work of all people, and the field of this work was not merely the horizon of the individual soul, but the whole world. The

Church was embedded in the cosmos, the cosmos in the Church. The Church’s mission, through the Holy Spirit, was to bring about the reciprocal transfiguration of the cosmos and itself as the New Creation. The responsibility of people on the Earth was and is to liturgise the world, and by so doing, to heal divisions in an ecology of transfiguring light.

Clearly, restoration of sacred cosmology at the heart of Christian teaching, is the single most powerful step in an effective Christian effort to reverse the desecration of the cosmos in the next millennium.

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References and Notes

- [1.] G. K. Chesterton, *What’s Wrong With The World*, Chapter 5, 1910.
- [2.] A term coined by Philip Sherrard. See *Human Image. World Image* (Ipswich: Golgonooza Press, 1992), Ch. 7.
- [3.] Excerpt from the *Message of the Primate of the Orthodox Church Regarding the Church’s Position on the Protection of the Natural Environment*, Phanar, Sunday of Orthodoxy, 15 March 1992.
- [4.] *Ibid.*, p.243
- [5.] Roy A. Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999, p. 349.
- [6.] Thomas Aquinas himself quotes Dionysius some 1700 times in his works.
- [7.] *Celestial Hierarchy* 3,1. (PG 3-164D).
- [8.] *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* 1,3. (PG 3-373C).
- [9.] *Physiki*, or “natural contemplation” is a technical term in the Greek ascetic tradition. It means less the enjoyment of the beauties of nature than a rigorous noetic penetration into the “living symbols” that are all natural forms.