

ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN

Putting Orthodox Theology and Ecology into Practice

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The Ascetic Imperative

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I MUST BEGIN BY ASKING YOUR FORGIVENESS, BECAUSE I AM SPEAKING ABOUT things far beyond anything I have been able to live out. If one is to speak about asceticism in a way that rings true, one should speak out of the love and compassion that comes with its practice. I cannot do that. The best I can offer is my own efforts to understand how the Church's ascetic way can heal the brokenness in ourselves which the present environmental crisis reveals so starkly.

There is a frustrating paradox: despite all very inspiring theology articulated in recent years and the connections that we love to explore between Orthodox Christian faith and ecological action, the sad fact is that the 'greening' of our parish life or our personal way of living does *not* usually start from our faith. More often, it is triggered by 'green' attitudes in the surrounding society. Where such attitudes are prevalent, one might say that there is no harm done; Christians who are initially influenced by secular environmental attitudes can and do progress to a more churchly understanding of what is involved. But the fundamental problem lies elsewhere: in the fact that as Christians, and even as Christian communities, we so easily allow major areas of our lives to be dominated by social, political or ideological attitudes that may have very little to do with our faith. Given this sort of compartmental thinking, any sort of initiative in a parish to use resources more carefully and thoughtfully, or to consider the environmental-social effects of the way we go about our business, will immediately be pigeon-holed as 'environmentalism', with parishioners reacting positively or negatively according to non-churchly criteria.

There is an alternative way: it involves a strong awareness that living as Christians frequently means departing from the norms of the surrounding society in all sorts of ways (and not just on the narrow spectrum of moral and social issues that seem to loom large in the thinking of many Christians in America). To speak of this tension between life in Christ and cultural norms is to speak of *asceticism* – the constant struggle against

what comes 'naturally' to our fallen nature. It is no coincidence that monastic communities, which are in vanguard of the ascetic struggle, have generally been much more proactive than parishes in making environmental initiatives part of their everyday life.

In the early years of formulating a Christian response to the environmental crisis, some of us succumbed to what might be called 'the temptation of relevance' in regard to asceticism. There are evident strains upon all the earth's systems: these demand moderation in our use of resources, restraint of our appetites: and, look, the Church has the very life-style! There is of course some truth in this, as far as it goes: outward aspects of asceticism such as fasting do indeed reduce our ecological footprint. I remember one year when the beginning of Lent coincided with news of riots in many parts of the world occasioned by high food prices. The increases had been triggered, we were told, by the diversion of arable land for the production of maize for ethanol; this on top of the fact that much land that could be directly producing human food is instead providing food for livestock. It was a vivid reminder that our Lenten reversion to the 'green herb' that was the food of paradise also begins to reverse our fallenness in other ways, as it returns us to a way of eating that is fairer and less exploitative.

To focus only on this aspect of the Church's ascetic tradition does not really give very adequate account of it, however. The aim of the ascetic way is not to eat lower on the food chain, but to cut off our self-will and conquer our 'self love', our self-indulgence. Asceticism most certainly has practical implications – but less because of its techniques, more because it forms persons who are not hostage to their own desires but are capable of acting out of self-giving love.

I want to touch on three aspects of the ascetic way in relation to environmental concerns: the opportunities for 'ecological asceticism', the ascetic vision of creation and the ascetic path to self-knowledge.

Opportunities for 'ecological asceticism': Tito Colliander, in his classic *The Way of the Ascetics*, speaks of finding occasions for obedience in everyday life. Today's ecological picture, with its constant reminders of the impact of our most mundane and seemingly trivial choices on distant parts of the earth and future generations, surely offers us a vast wealth of such opportunities. For instance, we are confronted with the possibility that we, the affluent of the world, might have to relinquish some of the conveniences and luxuries that we have got used to: instead of being affronted at the very idea, we can embrace the opportunity to share with those in greater need. Limitations imposed by limited natural resources, or land, or the environmental cost of energy generation and/or use can be a way to discipline our wants, and at the same time to make sacrifices – albeit very modest ones! - out of love for others with whom we share God's material gifts. There may be ways in which an ecological asceticism practised in the world will manifest itself somewhat differently from traditional asceticism. Supplying one's basic needs with whatever is cheapest and easiest to obtain may be a good rule for avoiding the tyranny of worldly cares; but what to do when such items are the most likely to be produced,

and perhaps sold, by exploited workers labouring amidst environmental and other hazards? In a globalised world, 'living simply' can get quite complicated. Do I serve others best by buying local produce, or organic produce, or less ethically produced foods from the local shop whose owners are struggling to stay solvent? When does the joy I might give someone by a visit – or the benefit I might derive or even contribute by attending a conference – outweigh the environmental damage done by travelling there? But I would suggest that the core principle remains the same: even the small, 'private' decisions in my everyday life should not be conditioned simply by my whims and desires. And this is an ascetic exercise. Decisions about how and how much we travel, the goods and services that we buy, the way we use the land and buildings for which we are responsible, the sort of measures we will support and vote for, all provide ways of exercising obedience – of *listening to* the needs of other people and other creatures. No, this is not simple. Very rarely will there be one 'right' and one 'wrong' answer, and people will differ sharply in their ideas about how the interests of others are best served. But the crucial first step is to recognise that we have a responsibility to those connected to us through a supply chain, those affected by our emissions or our waste, the animals who directly or indirectly give their lives to feed us, and that this responsibility takes precedence over our personal comfort and convenience.

Asceticism, then, has to do with seeking obedience and service in our everyday choices. It does not simply mean 'consuming less'; although consuming less, refusing to complicate our lives with things we do not need, is certainly an important part of it. It is here this point that some people will object that such an approach is, in social and environmental terms, counterproductive: less consumption slows economic growth, and this exacerbates unemployment and poverty and makes environmental protection an unaffordable luxury. This objection is disingenuous, however. Modern economic life features a constant succession of rearrangements occasioned by changes in demand, whether spontaneous or artificially stimulated, as well as other factors such as the desire of companies to maximise their profits. In most cases, we are expected to accept that unemployment among the 'losers' is a hazard of market forces. It therefore seems rather odd that people should be reproached in the name of the 'free market' for acting on what they really want (and don't want), instead of following an obligatory script assigned to *homo oeconomicus*. Nevertheless, an ascetic approach certainly does have economic implications, and these merit serious thought. That discussion cannot be attempted here, but I would point to one question that arises: ethical and spiritual considerations apart, how viable is a system that relies on our buying goods we don't need made from materials that we soon won't have?

At this point, it is high time to remind ourselves that the struggle against self-will, the struggle to learn humility, is an unrelenting struggle *with myself*. Asceticism, ecological asceticism included, is never something to beat others over the head with or to fuel our righteous indignation. If I am becoming an eco-bore or a single-issue person, there is something wrong. There are times when cutting off my own will also means not insisting on *my* environmental agenda. (E.g.: you are in a parish where many people will not take responsibility for a coffee hour unless they have the convenience of throw-away cups

and plates. Which should take priority: avoiding bags of waste, or giving parishioners an additional opportunity to grow together into the Body of Christ, so that perhaps they eventually start to ask what this implies for everything that they do as a community?).

The ascetic vision: so far, I have talked in terms of using goods and resources. But ascetic use of resources and of goods, whether natural or man-made, progressively leads us towards a radically changed vision of the creation to which we all belong – 'we all' meaning all humans and all the creatures and matter that serve us in various ways, as well as the rest of creation animal, vegetable and mineral. We begin to see the things and creatures about us in relation to their (and our) Creator, and ultimately in His light; we cease to look at other created things through the prism of our own wants, or even needs. This practice creates what Olivier Clément calls a 'wondering and respectful distance' between us and the world.¹ *Not* a 'distance' in the sense of a separation between man and other creatures, but rather a space that allows each other creature to exist in itself and for its Creator, beyond and prior to the services it may provide to us and to every other creature that shares its ecosystem.

It is probably unnecessary to elaborate on the practical implications of seeing a tree, a river, a mountain or meadow, and the community of creatures within them, as something existing 'in its own right' (or, more precisely, in relation to its own Creator). When such an attitude is held in balance with love for our neighbour, it will not prevent us on occasion making a sober and considered decision to harness these things to serve human needs. It might inspire us personally to sacrifice our *own* convenience for the benefit of some other creatures (think of St Sergius of Radonezh giving his last crust to the bear that would visit him); but it will certainly not lead us to value the real, legitimate needs of *other* people below those of other creatures. (Although it should be noted, parenthetically, that such clear-cut choices are far rarer than some of the rhetoric would have us believe; 'the interests of non-human creatures' is usually a proxy for the interests of a healthy ecosystem, on which the well-being of us all ultimately depends). An attitude of seeing all things in relation to their Creator will, however, cause us to recoil from uses of the world that are thoughtless and wasteful, from needless damage to plants or landscapes or artefacts or to the lives of other creatures.

The full reality of all creation's relationship to its Creator is revealed only to some of our great ascetics and saints – people who, like St Nectarios, are granted to hear the grasses praising God. The ascetic vision of creation is ultimately that of all created things united in a 'cosmic liturgy', an offering of prayer and praise to their Lord. This is far beyond the personal experience of most of us, yet it need not be totally impossible for 'ordinary people' to have some inkling of it. To quote Clément again,

The 'contemplation of nature' can give spiritual flavour to our lives even if we lay no claim to be in any way 'mystics'... A little loving attention in the light of the Risen Christ is enough. The humblest objects then breathe out their secret...²

¹ Olivier Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism* (London: New City, 1993), 141.

² *Ibid.*, p. 227.

Furthermore, such a vision is embedded in our tradition, and indeed in many of our liturgical texts, and I suggest that it needs to be actively taught as such; presented not simply as a rare spiritual experience, but as the reality that gives meaning to all our ways of talking about the world. Ideas of being 'priest' or 'steward' or 'custodian' of that part of creation that we have dealings with can become unhelpful or even misleading if they are not set in the context of a world that praises God by its very being, a world in which all things are His servants, not ours.

We may talk about the ascetic vision as 'contemplative' in reference to its source; but it also needs to be made very clear that this vision provides the still centre from which all our *activity* in the world has to radiate, and sets its mark on all such activity. The vision of creation turned towards God in worship and service does not mean that we have to leave everything just as it is. The cosmic liturgy includes man as *he* is – a curious, inventive, adventurous creature. It has room for use of the world, creativity, technology – including technological solutions to environmental problems. But this vision of the cosmos will incline us towards solutions that work *with* nature, recognising the embedded wisdom that is part of its 'praise'. Recognising, e.g., that those mosquito-infested salt marshes and sand dunes that block our view of the sea may actually serve an invaluable purpose when storms come. There is an asceticism involved in suspending our own pre-conceived ideas of how the world should be and recognising that nature may know best, so that we try to work with natural systems rather than conquer them. The practical implications of this deserve to be explored further. It is intriguing, for instance, to note the congruence between Archbishop Rowan Williams' description of the creative artist exercising an 'asceticism of setting aside preferences and purposes' and thereby 'allowing the rhythm of the deepest reality to become transparent in [his]acts',³ and the account in Janine Benyus' remarkable book *Biomimicry* of how we learn to 'echo nature' in our use of the world: 'The preparation.... was a *quieting* on my part, a silencing of my own cleverness long enough to turn to nature for advice...'⁴

These days, it is of course very easy to argue against the idea of 'conquering' or 'dominating' nature. But the ascetic vision of creation actually takes us considerably further than that. It suggests that the whole question of 'man's relationship to nature', which has obsessed environmentalists for 40 years or so, is, not precisely the wrong question, but certainly the wrong place to start. It is misleading to start with an idea of creation, even terrestrial creation, as a closed system of two-way relationships. Prior to any question of how creatures relate to one another, there has to be the recognition that all of them exist primarily in relation to their Creator. I am suggesting that we need to rediscover the nature and the Godwardness of material creation before we can understand how we ourselves fit into it.

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'Creation, Creativity and Creatureliness: the Wisdom of Finite Existence', <http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/2106/creation-creativity-and-creatureliness-the-wisdom-of-finite-existence>

⁴ Janine Benyus, *Biomimicry: Innovation inspired by nature* (HarperCollins/Perennial, 2002), p. 287.

The ascetic path to self-knowledge: finally, asceticism very rapidly brings us face to face with our own limitations. It takes only a few mild skirmishes with the 'wild beasts' within us to recognise that, like all other creatures, I am utterly dependent on God's grace and mercy. And to realise that we humans are all in the same boat. From here begins the universal compassion and sense of the oneness of mankind that is so marked in the great ascetics. On the intellectual level, we are all constantly being bombarded these days with evidence of interdependence between nations, between people and between creatures that share the earth. Only when we come to know this in our hearts, however, can it bring forth a willingness to take the first step in making sacrifices. But a sense of the oneness of mankind also makes us aware of our fellowship with those who, like us, find it almost impossible to change, to give up luxuries and even trivial conveniences that we have got used to, to relinquish the material security we have been led to expect. First and foremost, we have to forgo the luxury of seeing ourselves as the righteous and someone else – climate change deniers, oil company executives, agribusiness-men... – as 'the problem' or 'the enemy'.

To experience human weakness, says St Isaac, is to know the power of God. Being made to confront our weakness is not depressing but liberating. This is in contrast with much of the environmental rhetoric that we hear, which may be outspoken about the damage done by human activities, but also often conceals an unbounded (and, on present showing, unfounded) confidence in what humans can achieve by their own efforts, if only they put their minds to it. If we tell people that a) the present mess is all their fault and b) it is now up to them to 'save the earth', it is perhaps not surprising that the toxic mixture of guilt and self-importance leads to despair and paralysis. The good news is that we do not need to 'save the earth'. Our calling is to grow into Christ who *is saving* all of creation. Certainly, this involves action. It means acting out of love and compassion on every level, with all the good sense and wisdom we can muster. The thing that is fruitless and counterproductive is to measure what *my* action is able to achieve – whether I am an individual re-using old envelopes, an environmental activist, a political leader or a millionaire philanthropist – against the scale of the problems. The ascetic way teaches us that there is a crucial disjunction between our efforts and the ultimate outcome of our lives, and this 'disjunction' is the space in which God acts. So any and every action that we perform 'makes a difference' to the extent that it is an act of faithfulness. Any and every act of faithfulness helps shape us into an instrument rather than an impediment to God's saving work.