

# Orthodoxy in America

LECTURE SERIES

## ECOLOGICAL CRISIS: ECOLOGICAL HOPE OUR ORTHODOX VISION OF CREATION

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A LECTURE BY HIS GRACE BISHOP KALLISTOS WARE OF DIOKLEIA

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## UNDER THE SIGN OF THE RAINBOW

Once, on holiday in the English Lake District, I was climbing up towards a high mountain pass. The wind was blowing fiercely on my back. As I plodded on, with my coat collar turned up, a series of rain showers beat down upon me, short and sharp, each lasting some two or three minutes, and each followed by a brief interlude of brilliant sunshine. Reaching the summit of the pass at long last, I turned around and looked back down the valley.

I was greeted by a scene that I shall never forget. The alternation of rain and sunshine, following each other in such rapid succession, meant that from my lofty vantage-point, I saw not just one rainbow, but a whole series of brightly colored bows in the sky — four, five, six or more — rainbow after rainbow, stretching far into the stormy distance. At all times the rainbow is a thing of beauty, but never before and never since has my heart leapt for joy at the sight of a rainbow in the way that it did on that wild and windy afternoon. Truly it was a moment of disclosure, a theophany.

The symbolic meaning of the rainbow is rich and many-sided. St. Gregory of Nyssa (d.ca. 394), for example, uses the rainbow to illustrate the doctrine of the Trinity. Within a rainbow, he says, “the brilliance is both continuous and divided.” It contains a multiplicity of colors that are not confused but distinct; yet there is no interval between the colors, and together they constitute a single, undivided

rainbow. So within the Godhead the three persons are distinct yet not separated, and together they constitute a single triune Deity. This is for me one of the most effective images employed by a patristic author to denote the *perichoresis*, the interpersonal co-inherence, of God who is three-in-one.<sup>1</sup>

Today, however, I wish to explore a different meaning of the rainbow — its ecological significance. In Scripture, the rainbow is particularly connected with the story of the Flood. As the waters recede, God says to Noah: “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between Me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations. I have set My bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and the earth” (Genesis 9:12-13). Every time we see a rainbow, then, we are to recall the cosmic covenant established after the Flood between the Creator, humankind, and the earth, uniting all three each to the other in a bond of sacred trust. We are to reflect how we and the animals are covenant partners in a single earth community. We and they share a common future on this sadly endangered planet. We are the “environment” of the other creatures, and they are ours; and together we depend upon the same earth, air and water.<sup>2</sup>

#### CHRIST AND THE WORLD OF NATURE

This cosmic covenant, established by God with Noah, has been reaffirmed by Jesus Christ through His incarnation, death and resurrection. It is surely remarkable how consistently the whole creation in its many aspects is involved throughout the story of our Savior’s earthly life.

*A star appeared at His birth* (Matthew 2:9-10).

*An ox and an ass stood beside His crib as He lay in swaddling clothes.*

*During the 40 days of His temptation in the wilderness,  
He was “with the wild beasts”* (Mark 1:13).

*He often spoke of Himself as a shepherd, and likened His disciples to sheep* (Luke 15:3-7, Matthew 18:10-14, John 10: 1-6).

*His teaching was regularly illustrated by analogies from the realm of nature: He spoke of lilies* (Matthew 6:28-30), *of the mustard bush full of nesting birds* (Mark 4:32), *of the animal that needs to be rescued on the Sabbath day* (Matthew 12:11).

*He urged us to be reptilian in our subtlety, avian in our guilelessness:*

*“Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves”* (Matthew 10:16).

*He insisted that every sparrow is precious to God the Father* (Matthew 10:29).

*He compared His feelings for Jerusalem with the maternal love of a hen for her chickens* (Matthew 23:37).

*As Lord of Creation, He stilled the storm and walked upon the water*

(Mark 4:35-41; 6:45-51).

Most notably of all, the entire natural order participated in His passion: the earth shook, the rocks were split, the cosmos shuddered (Matthew 27:51). As St. Ephrem the Syrian (d. 373) expressed it, “Men were silent, so the stones cried out.”<sup>3</sup> In the words of the Old English poem “The Dream of the Rood,” “All creation wept.”<sup>4</sup> This cosmic involvement in the death of God incarnate is affirmed in especially

vivid terms in the *Praises* or *Enkomia* that are sung in the Orthodox Church on the evening of Good Friday or early in the morning of Holy Saturday:

*“Come, and with the whole creation let us offer a funeral  
hymn  
to the Creator...”*

*“One of the Trinity endures a shameful death in the flesh on  
our  
account; the sun trembles and the earth quakes...”*

*“The whole earth quaked with fear, O Word, and the Daystar  
hid  
its rays, when Your great light was hidden in the earth...”*

*“The sun and moon grew dark together, O Savior, like faithful  
servants clothed in black robes of mourning.”*

*“O hills and valleys,” says the Virgin Mary, “O multitude of  
humankind  
and all creation, weep and lament with me, the Mother of  
God.”*

Most remarkably of all, in what is truly an amazing statement, it is said in the *Enkomia*:

*“The whole creation was altered by Your passion: for all things  
suffered  
with You, knowing, O Word, that You hold all in unity.”<sup>5</sup>*

Do we reflect sufficiently, I wonder, upon this co-suffering of the whole creation with Christ the Creator? Do we allow fully for the

ecological implications of the incarnation, for the way in which, to use the words of Edward P. Echlin, Jesus is “ecologically inclusive, enfleshed, embedded in the soil like us,” containing within His humanness “the whole evolving earth story?”<sup>6</sup> Do we place enough emphasis upon the fact that Christ came to save, not the human race only, but the totality of the created order? The creation in its entirety, as St. Paul states, “is waiting with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God” (Romans 8:19). Let us never forget that we are saved, not *from*, but *with* the world.

This cosmic covenant, established by God with Noah under the sign of the rainbow, reaffirmed by Christ through His flesh-taking, His sacrifice on the Cross, and His rising on the third day, has been tragically breached, as we are all aware only too painfully; and the effects of this tragic breach become more and more evident each year. Robert Frost remarked, “It doesn’t take long to destroy a continent”; or, we may add, a whole planet. The fragility and vulnerability of our planet has been well expressed through the image of a dew drop:

*When we contemplate the whole globe as one great dew  
drop, striped and dotted with continents and islands, flying  
through space with other stars,  
all singing and shining together as one, the whole universe  
appears as an infinite storm of beauty.<sup>7</sup>*

Yes, indeed: how beautiful a dew drop is, yet also how easily shattered! Have we not good reason to fear for the future of our globe?

#### CREATED FOR MUTUAL JOY

In our reflections together upon the “bow in the clouds,” let us go back to first principles. Why did God choose to create the world? And what is our human vocation in this world that God has created?

Why did God choose to create the world? To this unanswerable ques-

tion — and yet we cannot avoid asking it — the simplest and best response is to say: He created, because He is love. This is the reply that was given to the 14th-century English anchorite Mother Julian of Norwich:

*[Our Lord] showed me something small, no bigger than a hazelnut, lying in the palm of my hand, as it seemed to me, and it was as round as a ball. I looked at it with the eye of my understanding, and I thought: What can this be? I was amazed that it could last; for I thought that because of its littleness it would suddenly have fallen into nothing. And I was answered in my understanding: It lasts and always will, because God loves it; and thus everything has being through the love of God.*

*In this little thing I saw three properties. The first is that God made it, the second is that God loves it, the third is that God preserves it. But what did I see in it? It is that God is the Creator and the protector and the lover.<sup>8</sup>*

Following out Julian's line of thought, we may say: rather than think of the Deity as Unmoved Mover, Uncaused Cause, Primordial Ground of Being, let us think of Him as God the Lover. Rather than speak of creation "out of nothing," *ex nihilo*, let us speak of creation "out of love," *ex amore*.

In answer, then, to the question, "Why did God create?" we may respond with a phrase from the writings attributed to St. Dionysius the Areopagite (ca. 500): "Divine *eros* is ecstatic." <sup>9</sup> Dionysius has here in mind the literal sense of *ekstasis*, meaning "standing outside oneself." God created the world because His love is outgoing and self-diffusive, and without this overflowing love the world would not

exist. The point can be reinforced by recalling the doctrine of the Holy Trinity; for creation is a Trinitarian act. "God is love," says St. John (I John 4:8). But this divine love is not just self-love but mutual, or shared, love. God is not just the monad, self-contained, loving Himself alone. God is the triad, the uncreated rainbow of Father, Son, and Spirit, loving each other, united one to the other in an unceasing movement of *perichoresis*. God is not only personal but also interpersonal, not only a unit but also a union or communion. One of the characteristic words used by the Cappadocian Fathers to describe the Trinity is precisely the term *koinonia* or communion.<sup>10</sup>

The doctrine of the Trinity, then, is a way of saying that God's nature is shared love, mutual self-giving. And if God the Trinity is in this way a mystery of shared love, then it is altogether appropriate — altogether in conformity with His nature — that God should have chosen to create the world, so that others beside Himself might participate in the Trinitarian movement of love. To love is to share, and for this reason God desired to share Himself with beings other than Himself extending the circle of reciprocal love beyond the uncreated to the created. He chose to create the world, and in that world He chose to fashion living persons endowed with freedom and capable of love, so that He might love them and be loved by them in return. Such, then, is the "ecstasy" of divine *eros*. Note that I have spoken here of "living persons," for it is only persons, endowed with self-awareness and freedom, who are capable of love. You may love your computer, but your computer does not love you!

What St. Dionysios expresses in terms of ecstatic love, St. Maximos the Confessor (d. 662) spells out in terms of mutual joy:

*God, full beyond all fullness, brought creatures into being, not because He had need of anything, but so that they might participate in Him in*

*proportion to their capacity, and that He Himself might rejoice  
in His  
works through seeing them joyful.*<sup>11</sup>

If we envisage the universe in this manner as the expression of mutual love and mutual joy, then clearly we cannot rest satisfied with a “deist” doctrine of creation, whereby the world is regarded as an artifact, upon which the Divine Creator acts from the outside as an architect or engineer. The world, in other words, is not just a piece of clay shaped by the uncreated Potter, not just a clock that the celestial Clockmaker has wound up and then left to go on ticking by itself. Surely, on the model suggested by Mother Julian, St. Dionysios and St. Maximos, creation is not just something upon which God acts from the exterior; rather it is something through which He expresses Himself from within. God is not only outside everything, but equally inside everything. Our primary images, when we describe God’s relation to the world, should not be of molding, organizing or manipulating. We should think rather of God’s indwelling and omnipresence. To say that God is Creator is to say that He is “everywhere present and fills all things,” a phrase often applied in the Orthodox liturgical texts to Christ or the Holy Spirit.

This idea of creative indwelling and omnipresence is spelled out by St. Maximos the Confessor in terms of the interplay between Christ the Creator Logos and the immanent *logoi* that He has implanted in each created thing. It is spelled out likewise by St. Gregory Palamas (1296-1359), when he distinguishes between the divine essence and the divine energies: the first remains infinitely transcendent, unknowable to both angels and humankind, not only in the present age but in the age to come, while the second are inexhaustibly immanent, permeating all that exists and maintaining it in being.

Using a more modern terminology, it is legitimate to speak in this

context of panentheism, as distinct from pantheism. In adopting this somewhat slippery word panentheism, I am not using it in the sense understood by such thinkers as Hartshorne and Whitehead, for whom God is in some sense dependent upon the world. I intend by panentheism simply the view that God includes and penetrates the entire universe, so that every part of it exists in Him; and yet, as against pantheism, God’s being is more than the universe and is not exhausted by it.<sup>12</sup> Totally immanent, He is at the same time totally transcendent. The pantheist, that is to say, asserts, “God is the world and the world is God;” and that, I submit, is not a Christian option. The panentheist, by contrast, affirms “God is in the world and the world is in God;” and that, I submit, is entirely Christian — not only a possible way of understanding the meaning of creation, but the only way that is genuinely in accordance with the Bible.

The Christian panentheist adopts in this way a dialectical and anti-nomic stance. In every encounter with another person or thing, he exclaims, in the words of the Anglican poet and theologian Charles Williams (1886-1945), “This also is Thou; neither is this Thou.”<sup>13</sup> God, in the phrase of Rudolf Otto (1869-1937), is “the Wholly Other,” *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, ultimate Enigma surpassing everything that exists, beyond all understanding and all participation.<sup>14</sup> Yet God is at the same time at the centre of everything, the core of its core, more intimate to us than we are to our own selves, “more necessary to us than our own heart,” as the 14th century Byzantine liturgist St. Nicolas Cabasilas puts it,<sup>15</sup> closer to us than the jugular vein, to use the words of the Qur’an.<sup>16</sup> “Cut the wood in two, and I am there,” states the Gospel of Thomas (2nd century); “lift up the stone, and there you will find Me.”<sup>17</sup> To adapt a sentence by Father Alexander Schmemmann (1921-1983): “The Christian is the one who, wherever she or he looks, sees everywhere Christ and rejoices in Him.”<sup>18</sup>

A panentheist approach such as this implies that creation is to be envisaged, not as a once-for-all event in the past, but as a continuing

relationship in the present. The world exists because God loves it: not just because He loved it long ago, at the beginning, but because He loves it here and now, at this moment as at every moment. We are to think and speak not in the aorist, but in the present tense. We are to say, not “God made the world, once upon a time, in far-off ages,” but “God is making the world, and you and me in it, at this instant and always.” If the Divine Maker did not exert His demiurgic will at each split second of time, the universe would immediately collapse into the void of non-being. In the words of St. Philaret, Metropolitan of Moscow (1782-1867), “All creatures are balanced upon the creative word of God, as if upon a bridge of diamond; above them is the abyss of the divine infinitude, below them that of their own nothingness.”<sup>19</sup> This creative word that constitutes St. Philaret’s bridge of diamond is a word spoken, not just once for all, but continually — a word spoken unceasingly “yesterday and today and forever” (Hebrews 13:8).

If, however, we venture to speak in panentheist terms such as these, there are two important qualifications that should not be overlooked. First, our insistence upon the divine immanence and omnipresence should never lead us to underestimate the ontological gap between Creator and creation. God is necessary to the world, but the world is not necessary to God. I have said that is was appropriate and in conformity with His nature as ecstatic love for God to create the world, but this does not signify that He was in any way compelled to create it. On the contrary, nothing constrained God to bring the world into existence, but He acted in total freedom. He chose to create.

The point is well made by Father Georges Florovsky (1893-1979):

*The world exists. But it began to exist. And that means: the world could have not existed. There is no necessity whatsoever for the existence of the world. Creaturely existence is not self-sufficient and is not independent... Creation by its very existence witnesses to and proclaims its creaturehood,*

*it proclaims that it has been produced... But unexpectedly it is precisely in its creaturehood and createdness that the stability and substantiality of the world is rooted.*<sup>20</sup>

Created existence, then, is not self-sufficient but contingent. The world is not a closed system but something that points beyond itself: it depends on God. The creation is a gift, a free gift from God, the free gift of His love. In the words once more of Father Florovsky, “The sole foundation of the world consists in God’s freedom, in the freedom of Love.”<sup>21</sup>

The second qualification that needs to be kept in view is that this world in which we dwell is a fallen world, marred and distorted by original sin and by the personal sins of each one of us. In itself, as the divine creation, the world is intrinsically good: “God saw everything He had made, and behold, it was very good” (Genesis 1:31) — or, as the Greek Septuagint version expresses it, *kala lian*, “altogether good and beautiful.” Despite the fall, this intrinsic beauty persists, but it is a flawed beauty. Yet, even if the fall is not total, we are sharply aware that the world as we know it in our present experience is not the world as God intends it to be. There is a radical discrepancy, a tragic hiatus, between the divine plan and our actual situation. We feel deep within us a nostalgia for a lost paradise, but we are all too vividly conscious that the environment which surrounds us is not paradise. We know ourselves to be exiles from our true home. To put the same point differently, using St. Paul’s words, the whole universe is in “bondage to decay,” and it “groans aloud,” longing to be “set free” (Romans 8:20-22).

### GOD BE MERCIFUL TO US SINNERS!

In the light of this vision of creation, in the light also of the present environmental crisis, what are we to say about our human vocation within the created order? And, when we are asked more particularly, “Is creation safe with Christians?” what is to be our answer? I fear that, in the light of our past record, the answer has to be, “Probably not;” or, at best, “Only with some Christians.”<sup>22</sup>

The first thing to be said in this context is that the familiar phrase which I have just used, “environmental crisis,” is not strictly accurate. The present crisis is not really outside us, a crisis in our physical surroundings, but it is a crisis within us, a crisis in the way we humans think and feel. The fundamental problem lies not in the ecosystem, but in the human heart. It has been rightly said that we are suffering from ecological heart failure. The real question at issue, that is to say, is not technological or economic, but spiritual. If the atmosphere is growing ever more polluted, if the lakes and rivers are becoming poisonous, if the forests are dying and the green pastures of the earth are turning into deserts, this is because we human beings have become alienated from God and from our own true selves. We have suffered a cosmic loss of memory, and by forgetting who we are, we have lost our proper relationship with the world around us. In the words of the Orthodox poet and ecologist Philip Sherrard (1922-95), “Before we can effectively deal with the ecological problem we have to change our world image, and this in its turn means that we have to change our self-image.”<sup>23</sup>

A solution, then, cannot come simply through the acquisition of greater scientific knowledge. Our most urgent need is not for more sophisticated technological skills, but for an act of cosmic repentance, of *metanoia* in the literal sense of the Greek word, that is, “change of mind.” We need to change our whole way of

thinking about God, the world, and ourselves.

Closely related to this first point is a second. Our misuse of the creation is to be regarded as a sin. This was asserted with great emphasis at the First International Symposium on Religion, Science and the Environment, convened in September 1995 by His All-Holiness the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I. To say that misuse of material things is not just a technological miscalculation but a moral transgression may seem an obvious point, but it is a point that Christians in the past have all too often overlooked. We have tended to assume that sin involves only what we do to other human persons. Yet we are tragically short-sighted if we think in this way; we are forgetting the “bow in the clouds,” the cosmic covenant. Our maltreatment of earth and air, of watersprings, plants, and animals, stemming as it does directly from our greed and selfishness, is indeed a sin, a deadly transgression, that cries out for repentance and reparation.

In the Orthodox *Euchologion* or Book of Prayers, there is a special “Service when in danger of an earthquake.” Here we read, in a sentence I cannot easily forget: “The earth, though without words, yet cries aloud: ‘Why, all peoples, do you inflict such evils upon me?’” Yes, certainly: in our sinfulness we have been inflicting, and we continue to inflict, great “evils” upon the long-suffering earth that God in His love has granted for our use; dire and wicked “evils” upon the atmosphere, the plants, and the living creatures; and for these many “evils” we need to ask forgiveness. God be merciful to us sinners!

### PRIESTS OF THE CREATION

To describe the relationship of human beings to the realm of nature, three words have been commonly used by Christians: king, steward, priest. The first of these, king, has good Scriptural authority. In the account of creation at the beginning of Genesis, immediately after the making of the human being (adam) in the divine image and like-

ness, he is given dominion over all the animals (Genesis 1:26), and he then goes on to exercise this dominion by assigning names to every living creature (Genesis 2:19-20). It is noteworthy that this kingship conferred on humankind is presented in the Genesis account as the direct consequence of our creation in God's image. God the king of the universe is generous, tenderhearted, compassionate; our human kingship, then, if it is to be a true icon of the divine kingship, should display exactly these qualities. Dominion does not mean domination. Sadly this has not been understood by Christians over the centuries; and so the language of kingship, legitimate in itself, has in practice encouraged exactly the arrogant and insensitive mentality that is responsible for the present ecological crisis. Such language, then, is best avoided in North America and Western Europe at the present time.

Acknowledging the misunderstandings caused by the notion of kingship, shall we do better to speak of humankind as the steward of creation? This has the advantage of making clear that our authority over the created world is not absolute but delegated. We are not the owners or proprietors of creation, for the world belongs to God and not to us. It is merely given to us in trust. The language of stewardship, however, also has disadvantages. It could be taken as implying a utilitarian, managerial approach to nature, such as regards the world around us as an "asset" to be developed and exploited. We have to guard ourselves against the tendency to objectify and depersonalize the realm of nature, treating it as an "it" rather than a "thou."

In view of these possible misapplications of the terms "king" and "steward," it is wise to employ a third model: our human vocation is to be priest of the creation. Alongside the ministerial priesthood conferred on specific persons through ordination, there is also a universal priesthood bestowed on every human being, by virtue of the fact that each is made in the divine image; and this universal or ontological priesthood is renewed

through the sacrament of baptism. Now, as the Bible makes clear, the essence of priesthood — whether universal or ministerial — is to offer, to give thanks, and to bless. The priest is the one who, freely and with full conscious awareness, takes the world in his or her hands — the world God gifts to us — and offers this cosmic gift back to God the Giver, thereby calling down His blessing upon the entire created order. Through this act of priestly offering, creation is brought into communion with God, and so it is saved, fulfilled, and transfigured. Such is the essence of priesthood, and it is a vocation that only human beings can perform.

Our human task, then, as priests of the creation, is to transform the world into a "eucharistic offering," to use the phrase of Patriarch Dimitrios I of Constantinople, predecessor of the present Ecumenical Patriarch:

*Let us consider ourselves, each one according to his or her position, to be personally responsible for the world, entrusted into our hands by God. Whatever the Son of God has assumed and made His body by His incarnation should not [be allowed to] perish. But it should become a eucharistic offering to the Creator, a lifegiving bread, partaken in justice and love with the others, a hymn of praise for all creatures of God.<sup>24</sup>*

#### SACRIFICE AND LOVE

To appreciate at its true value this concept of cosmic priesthood, two things require to be added. First, there can be no genuine act of priestly offering without sacrifice, without what Patriarch Dimitrios I terms — elsewhere in the text just cited — an "ascetic spirit." He is using the term "ascetic" in a broad sense, to signify not only fasting, prostrations, and vigils, but also every form of voluntary self-restraint. "Asceticism," interpreted in this fundamental way, means a greater

simplicity at each and every level of our daily life, the willingness to limit our consumption of food and natural resources, the courage to distinguish between what I want and what I need, between my selfish desires and my legitimate requirements.

Only through constructive self-denial of this kind, only through a readiness sometimes to forego and renounce, sometimes to say “no” to ourselves, shall we rediscover our proper place in the universe. As the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I has insisted, this element of sacrifice constitutes precisely the “missing dimension” in our ecological program:

*There can be no salvation for the world, no healing, no hope of a better future, without the missing dimension of sacrifice. Without a sacrifice that is costly and uncompromising, we shall never be able to act as priests of the creation in order to reverse the descending spiral of ecological degradation... Without sacrifice there can be no blessing and no cosmic transfiguration.<sup>25</sup>*

St. Maximos the Confessor was right to say that the world was created for mutual joy. But, in the present fallen and sinful condition of humankind, there is only one path whereby we can enter into the great joy of the resurrection; and that is through cross-bearing. As we affirm in our Orthodox worship each Sunday at Orthros (Matins): “Behold, through the Cross joy has come to all the world.” Through the cross: there can be no other way.

Second, and yet more important, there can be no genuine act of priestly offering without love. It is love that lies at the heart of the divine mystery of the Holy Trinity. It is love that lies at the heart of the human mystery of our created personhood. It is love that expresses the image of God within us, love that enables each of us to act as priest of the creation, offering the world back to the Creator with thanksgiving. At the outset of the modern era, René Descartes took as his starting point the axiom *Cogito, ergo sum*, “I think, therefore I am.” But cogitation, the ability to develop arguments and to draw conclusions through the use of our reasoning brain, is not our only or, indeed, our highest function as human beings. He would have been wiser had he said, *Amo*,





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