

‘Book Review: *Toward an Ecology of Transfiguration: Orthodox Christian Perspectives on Environment, Nature and Creation.*’ Chryssavgis, J. & Foltz, B. (eds.), Fordham: Fordham University Press, 2013.’ in *Sobornost* 36:2 (2015), 90-5.

Emma C. J. Brown, Durham University

Toward an Ecology of Transformation is a collection of articles, most of which were originally presented at a conference in California at the St Nicholas Ranch and Retreat Center of the Greek Orthodox Metropolis of San Francisco from 25th-28th October 2007. Other articles in the collection have been previously published but have been included for ease of access since they were difficult to come by. Many contributions to the book are by some of the greatest Orthodox Christian thinkers of the last thirty years. Their task in common is to articulate the place of non-human creation within Orthodox thought. In many instances, this also takes the form of an Orthodox response to the environmental crisis, and especially the accusation that Christianity has been instrumental in causing this crisis.

The purpose of the collection, as expressed by its editors in the introduction, is to shed new light upon the problem of the ecological crisis from the wisdom of the Eastern Orthodox tradition, and also to make headway in dialogue and reconciliation between the East and West. In the former task the collection certainly succeeds. In the latter, there are notable instances where East-West dialogue has been furthered, but primarily the treatment of Western theology is somewhat periphery and dismissive.

The real strength of the collection however, is in its bringing together thirty-one different contributions from across the world and placing them in dialogue with one another. Contributors include established Orthodox theologians, clergy, philosophers, ethicists, a poet and lay Orthodox scientists. As such, the book makes for a varied and broad response to the place of non-human creation in Orthodox theology. On the whole the reader is left with an excellent introduction to the rich direction in which Orthodox thought may take environmental ethics, and more importantly, a dialogue partner from the East with which real conversation may take place concerning the future of the earth and the role of Christianity within it.

It is my intention, given the large number of articles in this book, to discuss a few of the more striking pieces in detail, and to give a brief overview of the collection as a whole.

The only clear cut section of the book is the grouping together of the first five articles, which approach the title topic through Patristic thought. They consider the environment through classic Patristic and Byzantine theologians including Dionysius the Areopagite, Gregory of Nazianzus, Maximus the Confessor and Isaac the Syrian. The articles by David Bradshaw and Andrew Louth stand out as particularly lucid contributions to an already existing scholarly topic of Maximus, ecology and the *logoi*.

In his article, Bradshaw¹ traces the history of the *logoi* in Christian thought. He then focuses on Maximus’ synthesis of Evagrius and Dionysius and the way in which *logoi* are both purpose within creation and part of the relationship between humans and creation, and humans and God. His

1 Bradshaw, D. ‘The *Logoi* of Beings in Greek Patristic Thought’, 9-22.

primary claim is that contemplation of the *logoi* of beings through practice of the ascetic life and participation in the liturgy, leads one to greater knowledge of the purpose of creation and of God Himself. Previous scholarly attention to this topic has neglected to recognise the role of human contemplation in Maximus' *logoi* theology,² so Bradshaw's conclusion that many modern practices might be corrected by considering creation through these means, comes as a particularly welcome insight.

Louth³ also discusses contemplation of the *logoi* in Maximus as discernment of creation as God intended it. He suggests that it is within Maximus' cosmic vision that we might find a means of recovering a sense of the interrelatedness of the universe and a wholeness and meaningfulness that has since been lost. Within Maximus' cosmology, the human is uniquely placed either to unite the cosmos or cause damage to it. As such, humans may express the richness and beauty of the cosmos, or cause gulfs of darkness and pain. These insights in particular, Louth notes, continue to bear relevance to our present day crises.

Especially commendable is Louth's critical passage on the utility of ancient cosmology in the modern world, which deftly argues for the continuing relevance of thinkers like Maximus the Confessor despite the changes in our knowledge of the world. Indeed, Louth writes, the human ability to comprehend its surroundings is what places it in such a unique position of understanding. It is in this sense that Maximus' cosmic vision compliments rather than frustrates our discoveries in mathematics and science.

Another welcome contribution is the reprint of Kallistos Ware's⁴ 1996 article 'Through Creation to the Creator', which focuses on the human as the root cause of the environmental crisis and claims that solutions that say otherwise are really only dealing with the symptoms and not the cause. He sets out his article in a kind of parable of two trees, introducing key components of Greek Patristic and Orthodox theology in a simple and very effective manner that makes this article particularly attractive as an introductory and comprehensive text on the Orthodox position on the environment. Ultimately, Ware concludes that the vision of the tree we must adhere to is that of Christ's Passion and that it is this image of human life that will transform the ecological crisis - "We cannot save what we do not love", he finishes, "But there is no genuine love without costly self-sacrifice".⁵

It is interpretations like Ware's, where humans are mediators of love and cosmic restoration, that dominate the article collection. There are, however, a couple of examples that diverge from this position. Possibly the most notable is that by Engelhardt,⁶ who chooses instead to promote the place of the human and its relationship with God over and above all else. This directs his ethical stance to affirm that if there is a possibility that a human elsewhere may be harmed in the formation of environmental policy, then that policy must be foregone, or at least delayed until it becomes apparent to what degree a human is likely to come off statistically worse.

Sadly, Englehardt's valid concern that often environmental policy may end up harming more vulnerable parts of the human population, becomes trivialised by his somewhat more absurd suggestions that the Orthodox ought to be more concerned with driving to church, having large families to spread the Orthodox faith, and not becoming seduced by environmental 'rituals' like recycling that may take the place of Christian ascetic traditions. His article concludes with the throwaway, but hugely contentious comment (that stands at odds with most other articles in the collection), that nature will not be transformed by God's uncreated energies, only man will.

In direct contradiction to Englehardt's conclusion, there is, shortly after, a contribution by

2 Eg. Bordeianu, R. 'Maximus and Ecology: The Relevance of Maximus the Confessor's Theology of Creation for the Present Ecological Crisis'. *The Downside Review* 127 (2009), 103-126; Munteanu, D. 'Cosmic Liturgy: The Theological Dignity of Creation as a Basis of an Orthodox Ecotheology'. *International Journal of Public Theology*, 4, 3 (2010), 332-44.

3 Louth, A. 'Man and Cosmos in St Maximus the Confessor', 59-71.

4 Ware, K. 'Through Creation to the Creator', 86-105.

5 Ware, 'Through', 105.

6 Engelhardt, H. 'Ecology, Morality, and the Challenges of the Twenty-First Century: The Earth in the Hands of the Sons of Noah 276-290.

Chrysostomos Koutloumousianos,⁷ who presents an original comparison of the Byzantine and early Irish positions on the immanence of God in creation. Koutloumousianos' piece is particularly welcome as one of the few articles that acknowledges valuable and similar ideas to be found in the geographical West as well as in the East. Yannaras,⁸ in an earlier article, for example, makes a sweeping referral to the paucity of Western theology as stemming from the 'culturally degenerate' Germanic tribes who inherited a complex theology that they simplified into a dualism that was in turn exacerbated by Western scholasticism and the Enlightenment. In contrast, Koutloumousianos' article avoids generalisations and draws extensively on Irish and Byzantine sources. He demonstrates similarities in these traditions, without extracting the Irish tradition from its contextual place within Western Europe (this is also true of Siewers,⁹ who contributed to this collection with another article on the Byzantine and early Irish tradition). Koutloumousianos describes the Irish landscape as filled with cosmic entrance and exit points, so that the divine entering into creation becomes the heart of their thought. This is epitomised in the Incarnation – Christ is at the deepest structures of everything. He concludes that both the Greek and Celtic mind conceive of creation as immanently sustained at all moments by the Creator, by merit of the fact that they are created. Hence God is present in his creation *because* without his sustenance creation would cease.

The book also provides extensive end material for ease of study and further edification. It features a vespers for the environment (for the 1st September, the beginning of the ecclesiastical year in the Byzantine rite), a compiled bibliography in English on environment, nature and creation split into sections on books and articles, a glossary of Greek and English theological terms, a list and brief background on all contributors to the volume, and three indexes – one of classical names, one of contemporary names and a general topic index. These additions make the book especially attractive to the student looking to pursue this line of study further. This, combined with the authoritative and extensive array of articles in the volume, and the distinct approach to nature and human conduct so different to much of what characterises the core of Western ethical thought, also makes this essential reading for any university course approaching environmental ethics.

A wide range of Orthodox thought is presented here that is capable of both introducing itself to the reader new to Eastern Orthodox thought, and thought-provoking for theologian already familiar with the tradition. Especially important is the comprehensive and cohesive nature of the text as the first and so far only extensive Orthodox response to the environmental crisis. This makes it essential reading for the Christian and non-Christian alike who would promote or dismiss the Christian contribution to ecological ethics.

The contribution of Orthodox theology to the topic of environmental destruction has long been awaited in many Western Christian and secular groups alike. This definitive collection is that response, reflecting variations as diverse as its people, but more importantly, giving them a forum from which real debate on the relationship between the human and the rest of creation may finally arise.

7 Koutloumousianos, C. 'Natural and Supernatural Revelation in Early Irish and Greek Monastic Thought: A Comparative Approach' 337-347.

8 Yannaras, C. 'Existential versus Regulative Approaches: The Environmental Issue as an Existential and not a Canonical Problem' 186-192.

9 Siewers, A. 'Orthodoxy and Eco-poetics: the Green World in the Desert Sea' 243-262.