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The Theological Roots of our Ecological Crisis. An Orthodox Appraisal

Abstract

In this paper, I diagnose the theological roots of the ecological crisis by engaging the work of two prominent Orthodox scholars, John Chryssavgis and Philip Sherrard. I argue that the cause (αίτία) of environmental degradation is in humanity's forgetfulness of the primordial vocation to serve, minister and offer the world back to the LORD as a gift. Such forgetfulness has led to a loss of what Philip Sherrard calls the "theoanthropocosmic vision", a way of viewing and 'doing' the world in a consistent manner with divine revelation ethically-responsible. Only a recovery



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of this vision, and a return to a cosmic priesthood, can address the roots of organic degradation.

Keywords

Orthodox theology, ecological ethics, John Chryssavgis, Philip Sherrard, cosmic priesthood, theoanthropocosmic vision

1 Introduction

Just over a half-century ago, the medieval historian Lynn White Jr. penned an essay entitled “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis.”¹ In it, he pinned the blame of the then-current ecological crisis on the shoulders of Christians, who followed a religion that “not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God’s will that man exploit nature for his proper ends.”² According to him, Christianity—and in particular, that of the Latin-Western persuasion—established the setting for the “conquest of nature” by emphasizing the creative and dominating powers of the human will.³ Moreover, while he singles out the Western Christian saint, Francis of Assisi, as a paragon of ecological virtue, White’s thesis convicts the vast majority of Christians. White believed that Christianity, overall, was an anthropocentric religion. From the ashes of Christendom came the modern scientific method, which simply extended this anthropocentrism further, despite stripping away its Christian reference point.

1 Lynn White, Jr., “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis”, *Science* 155, no. 3767 (1967): 1203-7.

2 *Ibid.*, 1205.

3 *Ibid.*, 1206.

Much of contemporary eco-theology is done in the shadow of White's thesis, despite numerous counters to his claims.⁴ Eco-theologians wrestle with the ongoing ecological crisis, a crisis that has only been exacerbated in the past fifty-six years since White's essay was published. Of course, few scholars today are so bold as to blame one particular religion, historical event, or idea. The environment was not degraded overnight, but over the course of several years, by many perpetrators and across various cultures and ideologies. Understanding well the multifaceted characteristics of the current ecological crisis, it is not surprising that scholars, politicians, and activists have joined forces in finding a potential solution. Religious groups, too, have made significant contributions to this endeavor.⁵

The contribution of Orthodox Christian scholars to ecological ethics cannot be overestimated, especially given its demographic marginalization in the diaspora.⁶ In his brazen blaming of Christianity, White singles out the Greek East as being less culpable to environmental degradation. Among the more positive features (if not caricatures) he ascribes to the Christian East include an

⁴ White's thesis has received responses from across denominational and even secular lines. For a good survey on the responses and reactions, see Willis Jenkins, "After Lynn White: Religious Ethics and Environmental Problems", *Journal of Religious Ethics* 37, no. 2 (2009): 283-309.

⁵ For a survey of religious responses to ecological issues, see Leslie E. Sponsel, "Spiritual Ecology: Is it the Ultimate Solution for the Environmental Crisis?", *Choice* 51, no. 8 (2014): 1339-48.

⁶ Prior to Pope(s) Francis and Benedict XVI, whose contribution to ecological ethics is well known, the Greek Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople has long been recognized as a major religious voice speaking on ecological matters. For an overview of his many contributions to environmental ethics, see Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and John Chryssavgis (ed.), *On Earth as in Heaven: Ecological Vision and Initiatives of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew* New York: Fordham University Press, 2012.

emphasis on contemplation (rather than action), slower technological advancement, and its “symbolic” and “artistic” view of nature.⁷ Whether or not one agrees with these simplistic characterizations, it remains true that Orthodox Christians hold a unique place within environmental discourse. Should one attempt to investigate the theological - rather than the historical - roots of the ecologic crisis, an Orthodox Christian perspective can prove invaluable to digging for answers and providing potential solutions.⁸

In this paper, I attempt a diagnosis and cure for our current ecologic crisis, utilizing wisdom from the Orthodox Christian tradition, mainly as found in work of Philip Sherrard (1922 – 1995) and John Chryssavgis (1958 –). In doing so, I argue that the cause (αίτία) of ecological degradation is the loss of what Philip Sherrard calls the “theoanthropocosmic vision”, a way of viewing the world (κόσμος) in a way which perceives ourselves

⁷ Lynn White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155, no. 3767 (1967): 1206.

⁸ In addition to Patriarch Bartholomew and the authors engaged in this paper, several other Orthodox scholars continue to build upon their legacy. See Iuliu-Marius Morariu, "Ecology – Main Concern for the Christian Space of the 21st Century? Catholic and Orthodox Perspectives", *Journal For The Study Of Religions And Ideologies* 19, no. 56 (2020): 124-135, Maria G. Sereti, "The Contribution Of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew To The Configuration Of An Ecumenical "Integral Ecology"", *The Ecumenical Review* 70, no. 4 (2018): 617-26, Deborah Guess, "Reverencing Matter: An Ecotheological Reading Of John Damascene's Three Treatises On The Divine Images", *Colloquium* 52, no. 1 (2020): 34-50, Tamara Grdzeldze, "Creation And Ecology: How Does the Orthodox Church Respond To Ecological Problems?," *The Ecumenical Review* 54, no. 3 (2002): 211-218, K.M. George, "Toward A Eucharistic Ecology: An Orthodox Perspective", *Reformed Journal* 40, no. (1990): 17–22, and Philip LeMasters, "Incarnation, Sacrament, and the Environment in Orthodox Thought", *Worship* 81, no. 3 (2007): 212-226.

and creation “as the sacred realities that they are.”⁹ Thus, the first part of the paper traces Sherrard’s ideas for what this vision entails, and what has served as its counterfeit. Nevertheless, just as a diagnosis of an illness is not enough for recovery, so too is it not enough to point out the theological roots of the crisis is in a loss of said vision. What is needed for recovery is nothing else than regenerative medicine. Therefore, I utilize the work of Chryssavgis to argue that, once the theoanthropocosmic vision is restored, humankind can then ‘do’ the world the way it is meant to be done—as a cosmic priest within a cosmic liturgy. In the final part of the paper, I offer some ethical implications from an Orthodox perspective based on the work of Elizabeth Theokritoff. It is my conviction that a retrieval of Sherrard’s understanding of the theoanthropocosmic vision, combined with a notion of the cosmic priesthood (as articulated by Chryssavgis), addresses theological roots of the ecologic crisis while also providing a curative response.

2 The Life and Work of Philip Sherrard

Philip Sherrard was born in Oxford, England, in 1922.¹⁰ He was educated in Wiltshire and Cambridge, obtaining a degree in history. He soon joined the British Royal Artillery, serving in the Second World War. He first visited Greece and was introduced to Orthodox Christianity in 1946 while serving in the military. He

⁹ Philip Sherrard, *Human Image: World Image: The Death and Resurrection of Sacred Cosmology* Ipswich: Golgonooza Press, 1992, 10.

¹⁰ While no biography of Sherrard exists, details of his life may be found in the following tributes: Peter Mackridge, "Obituary: Philip Sherrard", *The Independent*, 1995, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/obituary-philip-sherrard-1585063.html>, and "Philip Sherrard", Deniseharveypublisher.Gr, accessed 10 April 2021, <http://deniseharveypublisher.gr/people/philip-sherrard>

was so impressed by Greece that he began to study Greek poetry, and upon his return to Cambridge, he completed a doctorate of philosophy in 1956, writing his thesis on modern Greek poetry. Later that year, he was baptized as an Orthodox Christian and eventually left his teaching post in England for rural and familial life on Evia, Greece. He continued to research, study, and lecture on various topics about poetry, art, history, philosophy, and theology. He, together with Kallistos Ware and G.E.H. Palmer, translated the *Philokalia* into English, which helped introduce the West to the spiritual writings and counsels of the Greek East. He passed away at the age of seventy-two, shortly after the publication of the final volume of the *Philokalia*.

Central to Sherrard's life and work was the idea that the human person had lost a profound spiritual connection to the world and God. Only by a true and intentional return to Christianity could the human person ever hope to regain this connection. His view of the human as alienated from God and creation was connected to his distrusting of modern technology and science, which he felt were established on faulty principles. Sherrard wrote on topics about this theme, including art, iconography, history, the distinction between Latin and Greek Christianity, and ultimately, ecology. In fact, one might argue that Sherrard was one of the original pioneers of the Orthodox eco-theology movement, which has emerged today as the vanguard for Christian ecological reflection.¹¹

¹¹ Despite his range of writings, Sherrard has not received much attention and remains understudied. However, there are scholars working with his thought, especially regarding the ecologic crisis. See Vincent Rossi, "Liturgizing The World: Religion, Science and the Environmental Crisis in Light of the Sacrificial Ethic of Sacred Cosmology", *Ecotheology*, no. 3 (1997): 61-84, Keith Lemna, "Human Ecology, Environmental Ecology, And A Ressourcement Theology Caritas In Veritate in the Light of Philip Sherrard'S Theandric Anthropology", *Logos: A Journal Of Catholic Thought And Culture* 14, no. 3 (2011): 133-154,

Sherrard was well aware of the developments in environmental activism during the 1970s and 1980s and understood its importance. However, from his Orthodox Christian perspective, such activism is mere bandaging of a deeper, more sinister wound—the human person’s amnesia and loss of a particular vision that safeguards and covers not only the environment but also the human person himself. Even scientific advances were not enough to heal creation. In fact, Sherrard not only believed that science was incapable of solving ecological issues but to a degree, was guilty of causing the issues themselves. Although a complete analysis of Sherrard’s entire works is beyond the scope of this paper, it would be helpful to identify how the theoanthropocosmic vision functions in his thought. To that end, I choose to focus on one of his works: *Human Image: World Image* (1992).¹²

3 The Cause of the Ecologic Crisis as Amnesia of Memory and Vision

Human Image: World Image is the third and final book of a trilogy on the catastrophe of modernity, the preceding two books dealing more specifically with the problem of modern science (*The Rape of Man and Nature*)¹³ and the necessity of the sacred in aesthetics and philosophy (*The Sacred in Life and Art*).¹⁴ Key to his concerns is that contemporary society subscribes (sometimes

and Jaime Tatay, "El Polémico y Fecundo Diálogo entre la Teología y la Ecología", *Estudios Eclesiásticos* 95, no. 373 (2020): 315-346.

¹² Philip Sherrard, *Human Image: World Image: The Death and Resurrection of Sacred Cosmology* Ipswich: Golgonooza Press, 1992.

¹³ Philip Sherrard, *The Rape of Man and Nature: An Enquiry into the Origins and Consequences of Modern Science* Ipswich: Golgonooza Press, 1987.

¹⁴ Philip Sherrard, *The Sacred in Life and Art* Ipswich: Golgonooza Press, 1990.

unknowingly) to metaphysical and ideological assumptions that break from traditional patristic thought and lead to the crises of the current day. The books comprising this trilogy have the revival of society as its ultimate goal. In *The Rape of Man and Nature*, Sherrard investigates the intellectual commitments of the modern scientific method and its application today. He declares that modern science is hopelessly “naturalistic”, leading to both the “dehumanization of man” and the “desanctification of nature.”¹⁵ *The Sacred in Life and Art* is concerned with the themes of beauty, creation, and what is commonly spoken of as the ‘sacramental worldview’.¹⁶ However, for the sake of time and appropriate space, I will focus solely on his arguments found in *Human Image: World Image*.

In this work, Sherrard takes up the topic of those modes of thought that have led to the current crisis and their philosophical and cosmological presuppositions. Typical of his style, he puts forward his argument and then traces its genesis and terminus by reading the history of ideas relevant to his thesis. In what follows, I reproduce his argument through a close reading of this main text, so as to demonstrate what the theoanthropocosmic vision is, how it was lost, and how it may be restored. These three movements correspond with Sherrard’s understanding of cosmology, epistemology, and anthropology, respectively.

“One thing at least we no longer need to be told is that we are in the throes of a crisis of the most appalling dimensions. We tend to call this crisis the ecological crisis...”¹⁷ So begins Sherrard’s work. In his introduction, he notes how contemporary life is lived in a way that “is humanly and environmentally suicidal,” and without serious reform, “there is no way in which we can

¹⁵ Philip Sherrard, *The Rape of Man and Nature*, 1-38, 93.

¹⁶ Philip Sherrard, *The Sacred in Life and Art*, 1-31.

¹⁷ Philip Sherrard, *Human Image: World Image*, 1.

avoid cosmic catastrophe.”¹⁸ At the time of the book’s publication (1992), scientists across the world were already echoing these concerns, warning about the dangers of “acid rain, the greenhouse effect, and the depletion of the planet’s ozone layer.”¹⁹ Among the effects of this crisis, Sherrard includes the pollution of soil via chemicals, deforestation, the testing of nuclear bombs, and the sprawl of urbanization.²⁰ Despite it being called as such, however, Sherrard states that the true essence of the crisis is “first of all a crisis concerning the way we think.”²¹ He peels back the layers from the ecological crisis, suggesting it is preceded by a faulty “world-image”, which is itself preceded by an erroneous “self-image”.²² He locates these deficient images as “[having] their origin in a loss of memory, in a forgetfulness of who we are...”²³ And, in order to overcome this collective amnesia, the author reveals a twin task: first, that we must “identify... the paradigm of thought that underlies and determines our present self-image and world-view”. Only then can one “recover, or rediscover, the vision of man and nature - or rather, the theoanthropocosmic vision - that will make it possible for us to perceive and hence to experience both ourselves and the world we live in as the sacred realities they are.”²⁴

Sherrard begins his historical tracing of cosmology in ancient Greece, examining the relevant aspects of Plato’s thought. Plato sits between two seemingly opposing poles of thought—on the

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Bland, J. (1990). World Health: the magazine of the World Health Organization: January-February 1990 [full issue]: Our Planet, Our Health: Think Globally, Act Locally. *World Health*, (January-February), 2 - 31. World Health Organization, 5.

²⁰ Philip Sherrard, *Human Image: World Image*, 1, 5.

²¹ Ibid., 2.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 3.

²⁴ Ibid., 10.

one hand, he seems inspired by the Pythagoreans in that the reality of the natural world has a mathematical, geometrical basis, with an “emphasis on the transcendence of the intelligible world of pure forms.”²⁵ On the other hand, when confronted with the tension between the realm of forms and that of the senses, Plato opts for a theory of immanence whereby “the Soul is said to be the origin of movement (*arche tis kineseos*... [the] intermediary between the eternal world of forms and the sensible world.”²⁶ The latter participates in the former, and while it is never treated as a self-subsistent entity, this does not take away from its realness. The authors of the *Corpus Hermeticum* develops this further, maintaining a Platonic dualism while pushing it further in the direction of affirming “that vision of the organic wholeness of life, of the intermingling of sensible and intelligible, visible and invisible...”²⁷

Christianity provides a monumental pivot by not simply upholding the goodness of material creation, but by insisting that it is the meeting place between the divine and human. Indeed, some of the earliest Christian heresies fell into the trap of disdaining and condemning the material, physical, and created world. Though the divine eludes capture, it rests within the human person, who “has the capacity to be an instance or an embodiment of the full reality of the divine.”²⁸ Even those Platonic influences on Christian formulae are limited, as Plato himself would have never been able to envision the divine taking on human flesh. In the Christian vision, the human person remains firmly planted in this world, while being oriented beyond to the next. “The Cross stands at the junction of our two-fold identity, as the parting of the ways between the mortal and immortal worlds,” Sherrard

²⁵ Ibid., 12.

²⁶ Ibid., 13.

²⁷ Ibid., 19-20.

²⁸ Ibid., 20.

writes.²⁹ Bridging the gap between the divine and human, Christ the Theanthropos becomes the embodiment of the sacred mysteries which link the two together.³⁰ In referring to Christ as “theanthropos”, Sherrard cites the Byzantine liturgical service for Holy Saturday, which sings of Christ as an incarnate being who transforms corruption into incorruption, granting immortal life to the human race.³¹

The Christian finds his or her identity not in fleeing humanity, but embracing it; by recreating oneself “into the image of God in which [one] is created and which, however obscured, lies still in the depths of [one’s] being.”³² Christ, having a “mediatorial cosmic role”, stands between eternity and time, created and uncreated, visible and invisible.³³ Even sin, despite its horror, never fully ruptures the connection between Creator and created any more than the incarnate Christ can be said to belong to the material or immaterial. Christian compassion - a literal ‘suffering-with’ - must extend to humans and non-humans alike, as the Fall lies within human rejection of this essential harmony.³⁴ While the Greek patristic tradition, to the author’s satisfaction, retained this optimistic worldview, the Latin scholastic tradition, under the influence of Augustine of Hippo, emphasized the fallen-ness of the created world and suspicion of the sensible, leading Christianity and Christian asceticism “to become increasingly other-worldly”.³⁵ The Renaissance response, then, “took the form of an

²⁹ Ibid., 22.

³⁰ Ibid., 24-25.

³¹ Sherrard translates it as the following: “[A]s a being made of earth has suffered in the flesh and yet as God has remained without suffering and who in Himself has transformed corruption into incorruption and through His Resurrection has opened the well of immortal life.” (Sherrard, 24)

³² Ibid., 26.

³³ Ibid., 28.

³⁴ Ibid., 29-30.

³⁵ Ibid., 31.

attempt to give the natural world a positive status within the cosmological scheme of things,” by affirming the sensual, prioritizing the role of the human person within the created order.³⁶ Despite its otherwise good intentions, it is in this reaction that the aforementioned crisis begins.

In chapter two (“The Fetish of Mathematics and the Iconoclasm of Modern Science”), Sherrard illustrates the ways in which the epistemological errors of the Renaissance and Enlightenment led to a disenchantment and disintegration of the previously holistic medieval worldview. Whereas the medieval worldview understood the universe as divinely-ordered, harmonizing created matter to the uncreated energies of God, and nature as the “mirror” to the love and beauty of God, the modern scientific worldview reduced the world as matter to be dominated, analyzed, and exploited.³⁷ According to Sherrard, the scientific revolution was the locus in which the theoanthropocosmic vision was lost. Far from being a Romantic reactionary, Sherrard offers a critique of modern science by deconstructing its principles and *a priori* assumptions. As already hinted in the introduction, his main critique of modern science is that it “presupposes the notion that we can obtain a knowledge of phenomena apart from, and without reference to, a prior knowledge of their inner and spiritual dimension.”³⁸ This “new philosophy”, as he calls it, emerged from the laboratories and experiment rooms, in university lecture halls and workshops which held mathematics as the apex of philosophical thought.³⁹

The key *a priori* assumption of modern science, according to Sherrard, is that “the structure of the universe is mathematical,” which in turn suggests that “physical reality is mathematical...

³⁶ Ibid., 32.

³⁷ Ibid., 33-34.

³⁸ Ibid., 9.

³⁹ Ibid., 35.

[and] what is real in nature is only that which can be expressed in terms of strict mathematical laws.”⁴⁰ In effect, epistemological knowledge is limited to only those things which can be known through “mathematical qualities, for it is these qualities alone that constitute their reality.”⁴¹ While one might claim that this is simply acknowledging the possibility of knowing sense-objects, Sherrard counters this by stating that, according to these scientific assumptions, even sense-objects are exempt from the realm of knowledge because “it is only certain aspects of them that are real, aspects like number, figure, magnitude, position, movement, [things] which can be expressed mathematically.”⁴² The objects themselves are ultimately unknowable. Those qualities “such as love, beauty, purpose, perfection, personality, soul, aspiration” are thus excluded from knowledge, at least in a first-order sense, because “they express value rather than quantity.”⁴³ Modern science, influenced by Cartesian dualism and its focus on “clear and distinct ideas”, separates the investigation of these “secondary qualities” from what it presumes to be the “external, objective realm of nature.”⁴⁴ In response to this, Sherrard poses an epistemological challenge: “If the mind is not and never can be in contact with the realm of nature and with physical objects, how can any certain knowledge of the latter be possible at all?”⁴⁵ The reduction of the human person to a mathematical machine has had grave consequences for not only the person, but also the world. By positing the “real world” as exterior to the person, modern science reduces the human to merely a computer processor and the world as an object for investigation, rather than

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*, 37.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 40.

adoration.⁴⁶ This becomes the God of the Deists, the supreme watchmaker, who arranges the cosmos according to logical, mathematical principles and remains absent from it. The world is then identified as “material, not spiritual, mechanical, not teleological.”⁴⁷ Sherrard judges this as detrimental, for now, not only the human mind but the cosmos “could be viewed as a vast despiritualized, mathematically computable system of masses moving in absolute space and time, hard, cold, colourless, silent, purposeless, impersonal and ultimately dead.”⁴⁸ Such a vision has no room for the Cross as salvific, triumphant, or as a bridge connecting the divine and human. Instead, the materialist view sees the crucified Christ only as a casualty of empire and one of many state-sponsored executions. This modern-scientific vision also “tacitly suppressed the Christian idea that the human image can be fulfilled only through the realization of its more-than-human potentialities, and that such realization requires assent to facts which are consequently of a supra-human nature.”⁴⁹

Sherrard holds that there are two main forms of consciousness—that of the angelic, spiritual, and higher kind, which has the capacity to apprehend, perceive, and experience things as they are, and that of the ego, material, and lower kind, which apprehends things according to their external design.⁵⁰ This corresponds to the duality of nature. Sherrard divides epistemology into two modes—that of “pattern-qualities” and “image-qualities.”⁵¹ Similar to a Platonic notion of forms and essences, Sherrard’s pattern-qualities “refer to the outer, inferior aspect of things, to what limits them,” while the image-qualities “give things their

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 50.

reality by linking them to Reality itself and allowing them to partake of Reality itself.”⁵² There is evidently a hierarchy between the two, with the pattern-qualities being on the lower plane of human epistemology, and the image-qualities on the higher. Returning to the ego-consciousness and the angelic consciousness, it is clear that Sherrard sees the former being tied to pattern-qualities and the latter focused on image-qualities. Pattern-qualities can be observed empirically, but image-qualities, by their very nature, cannot be measured. The angelic, spiritual consciousness can come to knowledge of lower things without jeopardizing higher knowledge, but the same cannot be said about the ego-consciousness, which is limited to apprehending outward appearances. Thus, to limit one’s knowledge to those things which can be empirically verified is to separate the full potentiality of human knowledge. Like Thomas Aquinas in the *Summa Theologiae*, Sherrard states that “nothing can be known except according to the mode of the knower.”⁵³ It is not surprising, then, that those who limit their knowledge to the pattern-based, ego-consciousness can claim existence and knowledge of God is impossible, for it indeed is, when transcendence and participation in the supra-natural is doubted.

So far in the work, Sherrard has tried to explain the cause of the ecological crisis by tracing the history of cosmology and epistemology through the ancient, patristic, and modern periods. What was once a promising synthesis (especially in the Greek patristic tradition) has crumbled to the ground. Moreover, it is not enough to merely state that the universe is “sacramental”—without a rigorous dismantling of modern science’s assumptions, the push

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid., 51, c.f. *The Summa Theologiæ of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 2nd ed. (trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 1920). Q.14, A1, reply to obj. 3.

to view nature as a sacrament can just be romantic sentimentalism.⁵⁴ Sherrard then dedicates the final chapter to the restoration of this sacred vision. As he writes,

What is required - though this may sound somewhat formidable and forbidding - is a kind of mystical-intellectual knowledge of God and divine realities that is not confined to the subjective inwardness of personal experience and that can be translated into a knowledge of the world and the cosmos that illuminates every object and every form of being.⁵⁵

The interrelatedness of the divine mysteries is key to this spiritual knowledge of God. For Sherrard, the separation of Christian doctrines of the Trinity, Creation, and Incarnation, has contributed to a loss of the cosmic significance of each.⁵⁶ More specifically, the theoanthropocosmic vision, which was held in honor by a number of patristic theologians, is lost whenever the cosmic importance of the Incarnation is ignored.⁵⁷ Sherrard understands the Incarnation not simply as the Logos taking on human flesh, but also as a “theandric union between God and the whole created world, through [humanity] and in [humanity].”⁵⁸ The loss of the theoanthropocosmic vision results in binaries and dualisms: either God or the world, human or divine, cosmos or anthropos, et cetera.⁵⁹ Returning to the concept of the image-quality, he remarks that “the sensible world is the image, the icon of the celestial world, and enshrines the spiritual reality of which it is the image: the two interpenetrate.”⁶⁰ Creation and incarnation cannot be separated without doing violence to either. In defining

⁵⁴ Philip Sherrard, *Human Image: World Image*, 147.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 148.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 149.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 153.

Christ's nature as "inseparably and unconfusedly" divine and human, the Council of Chalcedon enshrines this theanthropocosmic vision. In the author's words,

This, in brief, is the theandric mystery, and since this mystery, consummated in Christ, is the model according to which we can understand the relationship between the divine and the human as such—for Christ's human nature is universal—and in individual human beings in particular, we can see how the potentiality in each human being for transfiguration and divinization rests upon definite and explicit ontological ground—on a potentiality intrinsic to human nature, on an inherent capacity to be divinized.⁶¹

The theanthropocosmic vision, like all vision, proceeds from the one-who-sees. The Chalcedonian definition of Christ as divine and human can be extended to the point of suggesting that all that is divine is human, and all that is human is divine, but without mixture or confusion. All creation, then, "is grounded ontologically in the world of the Image-archetypes, and is their manifestation... all creation is the Body of Christ, the Incarnation of the Logos."⁶²

Sherrard's contribution to an Orthodox Christian perspective on the cause of ecological degradation is in this key concept of the theanthropocosmic vision.⁶³ Rooted in Platonic thought filtered

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 164.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 165.

⁶³ Vincent Rossi, one of the few contemporary commentators on Sherrard, uses the term "theomorphic", dropping the "anthropos" and cosmic". He does not explain why he makes this change, but, like Sherrard, states that the patristic conception of 'nature' was vastly different than the reifying naturalism of modernity and today. What he says about the theomorphic role may also be applied to the theanthropocosmic vision: "[In] traditional Christian ontology, especially in the fullness of the Eastern, Greek, Patristic, Byzantine, Orthodox dimension, all created nature and every created being is seen as and characterized as a

through the lens of the Greek patristic tradition, this vision helps identify creation as God-given and God-filled. Mere activism, for Sherrard, serves only as a bandage to a deeper, more sinister wound. The immoral actions towards the environment cannot be separated, in his estimation, from faulty knowledge-claims and perception. The displacement of the numinous and noetic with the mathematical and empirical has had devastating consequences for the human person's vision. However, once the theo-anthropocosmic vision is restituted, what is next? In addition, what does the recovery of this vision offer to Orthodox eco-theology today?

4 The Work of John Chryssavgis

In this second section, I move from Sherrard's diagnosis of the ecological crisis to a contemporary Orthodox theologian's suggested remedy. John Chryssavgis is an Archdeacon of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, who studied theology at the University of Athens, Byzantine chant, and completing his Ph.D. at Oxford. He has served the Orthodox Church through pastoral experience, administration, teaching, and research. He currently serves as a theological advisor to the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople. Among his publications include numerous articles, books, and edited volumes on theology, Orthodox spirituality, history, and ecology. In fact, one would be hard-pressed to find another Orthodox scholar who has written extensively on ecology and eco-theology as Chryssavgis. In his several works on the environ-

thought of God, or a particularized, manifested will of God, or an individualized, logocic essence of the Divine Logos; or as Western patristic and medieval thinkers like St Augustine and St Bonaventura would put it, as a vestige of God (*vestigia Dei*).” (Rossi, 76)

ment, he draws upon the Orthodox spiritual, liturgical, and patristic vision to show the ways in which Orthodox Christianity offers a more holistic solution to ecological problems.

In some ways, Chryssavgis is a spiritual successor to Philip Sherrard, and follow Sherrard's death, he offered an essay tribute recognizing Sherrard's important work.⁶⁴ Like Sherrard, Chryssavgis sees the Orthodox tradition, and its notions of creation, sin, redemption, and grace, as vineyards for fruitful ecological reflection. And while Sherrard's work often emphasized the philosophical and epistemological assumptions which undergird the ecologic crisis, Chryssavgis' writings offer a complementary theological response that not simply offers a vision, but a possible solution. In this section, I highlight one of the main themes in Chryssavgis' eco-theological writings which, I believe, represents an Orthodox response to environmental desecration—namely, that the cosmos is a liturgy, and the human person is to celebrate this cosmic liturgy as a cosmic priest. And, while he is not the first Orthodox theologian to utilize this concept, its prevalence throughout Chryssavgis' sheer volume of eco-theological writings makes him an appropriate conversation partner for Sherrard and the theoanthropocosmic vision.

5 The Ecological Crisis' Remedy

The first work of Chryssavgis' work dealing explicitly with ecology is his book, *Beyond the Shattered Image* (1999).⁶⁵ In it, he notes the inability of political and scientific lobbies to effectively treat the root cause of the ecologic crisis, which requires first a

⁶⁴ John Chryssavgis, "Essay Review: A Tribute to Philip Sherrard", *Colloquium* 28, no. 1 (1996): 66-74.

⁶⁵ John Chryssavgis, *Beyond the Shattered Image: Insights into an Orthodox Christian Ecological Worldview*, 2nd ed. Minneapolis, MN: Light and Life Publishing, 2007.

“change both [in] our self-image and world-view.”⁶⁶ His small book serves as a resource to help build this worldview with the help of the Orthodox Christian tradition. The book is divided into three parts: the first section seeks to re-vision the world as a sacrament; the second section appeals to the ascetic tradition of the early Church to show what attitudes and behaviors are necessary for change; and the third section deals with theological topics central to the Orthodox tradition. In each section, he emphasizes the importance of the human person ministering to the world as a cosmic priest. As he writes in the introduction,

“The Orthodox Church has retained a more ‘eucharistic’ - and more balanced view, by proclaiming a world imbued by God and a God involved in the world. Orthodox liturgy offers concrete - ‘incarnate,’ if you will - answers to the ultimate questions about salvation from corruptibility and death. Our ‘original sin’ lies in turning from God, manifested in the refusal to view life, and the life of the world, as a matter of interpersonal communication and as a sacrament of communion with the divinity. God is the Lord of the dance of creation, which is a voluntary overflow of divine gratuitousness and grace...

In a sense, the only duty of humanity is to recognize and, through doxology, to respond to the reality that the human person is - before and beyond any social or individual being, a political or rational animals - a liturgical celebrant of this innate joy in the world. This liturgical dimension of joyful praise in creation is a gift to the world, and does not depend on our environmental effort or awareness... Unless we entertain and joyfully enter into this interdependence of all persons and all things in what [Maximus the Confessor] calls the *cosmic liturgy*, we cannot hope to resolve issues of economy and ecology.”⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Ibid., 2.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 5-6.

Much of this resonates with Sherrard's theoanthropocosmic vision, but Chryssavgis offers more explicitly theological consequences of this vision. This is significant, because it is not enough to simply see the world in a particular way, but such vision should then influence our actions to 'do' the world in a way consistent with these new eyes. A sacramental view of the world, like a sacrament, is not enough for deep and lasting change. In fact, a deficient understanding of 'sacrament' can lead to turning a "sacramental worldview" into mere, pious sentimentalism. If one's vision sees sacraments as 'things', reified and objectified, we can expect a sacramental worldview stemming from such vision to see creation as a reified object itself. Sacraments also require human participation, but in ways in which the human takes part in, celebrates, and receives—no sacrament can be tied to conceptions of ownership and domination. Just as the sacraments of baptism, confirmation, Eucharist, penance, matrimony, holy orders, and anointing of the sick are incomplete until they are celebrated and enacted in actual persons and lives, so too is the theoanthropocosmic vision incomplete until it instantiated in right-action. For Chryssavgis, this right-action is nothing else than "the eucharistic offering of all to the creator."⁶⁸

What does this eucharistic offering consist of? Of course, we can answer of what it does *not* consist of—exploitation, abuse, misuse, and de-sacralization. Chryssavgis suggests that certain problematic passages in Scripture which seem to give license to creation-domination (Gen. 1:28) should be interpreted according to the larger narrative. For example, Adam's naming of the animals (Gen. 2:19-20) "implies a loving and lasting personal relationship on the part of Adam with the environment, indicative of the same dialectical (literally *in dialogue*) relationship between Adam and his Creator."⁶⁹ Christ, the new Adam, "realizes

⁶⁸ Ibid., 35.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 53.

the sacrament that was rejected by us.”⁷⁰ If humanity failed to offer the cosmos back to God as an act of eucharistic thanksgiving, then it is Christ who does that through the Incarnation, Passion, and descent to Hades. “Everything is required to undergo crucifixion in order to achieve resurrection; everything must die in order to rise,” he writes.⁷¹

As an Orthodox Christian, Chryssavgis holds the practice of asceticism as essential to the Christian life. But asceticism, too, must be adequately understood. The ascetic cannot be anti-matter or anti-creation. In his or her self-discipline and struggle, the ascetic puts to death those tendencies, thoughts, and behaviors which lead to selfishness, greed, and lust. Ascetics who denigrate and demeans the body and creation miss the mark by a severe margin. For Chryssavgis,

“[The] genuine Christian ascetic is the universal person who is freed from narrowness and limitations and divisions. The vision of the ascetic is both visual and personal: they are consciously aware that the problem of pollution cannot be distinguished from the problem of inner alienation. In the way to transfiguration, the Christian ascetic by no means leaves creation outside but in fact unites the whole cosmos discarded by sin.”⁷²

Whatever sacrifices and denials the ascetic makes can only be genuine if there is an intentional acknowledgement of creation as good. The way of asceticism is a way of negation which proceeds affirmation; the renunciation of worldly pleasures only has merit when such pleasures are recognized as good in their relation to God. There is no merit earned by sacrificing something that is sinful, for if to sacrifice is to “make holy”, then one cannot make holy that which is not. “If sin is considered the failure to

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 65.

accept and assume the world as a gift from God,” Chryssavgis writes, “then denial of the gift of beauty cannot be considered sacrifice or sacred.”⁷³ In the desert (both literally and metaphorically) where asceticism takes place, the ascetic affirms and celebrates creation in solidarity. The ascetic lives in a way which is conducive towards deification, which is synonymous with a life in which creation is honored. As Chryssavgis notes, “There is no sentimental attachment to animals or to nature in the desert, but simply a respectful co-operation and collaboration - even concelebration.”⁷⁴

Similar to Orthodox liturgies, the cosmic liturgy contains icons. Icons, which are so central to the Orthodox liturgy as a means of communing and experiencing the sacred mysteries, are also present in the cosmos. The icon is not merely a painting about Christ or the Theotokos or the saints - it is an image which reveals the sacred through mystical encounter, a divine disclosing of “the reality of the experience of the heavenly kingdom in this world.”⁷⁵ Chryssavgis likens the icon’s relationship with humanity to “the unborn child in the womb of its mother, [as] the icon presents to us the visible seeds of the divinity of the world.”⁷⁶ Quoting Sherrard, Chryssavgis states that the icon is meant to “transform” the onlooker so that he or she sees the dualities and binaries of world and person, spirit and matter, Divine and human as “united in one Reality, in that ageless image-bearing light in which all things live, move, and have their being.”⁷⁷ The mystical-sacramental nature of the icon means that it transcends these binaries and unites them through communion.⁷⁸

⁷³ Ibid., 96.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 117.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 121.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 127, citing Sherrard, *The Sacred in Life and Art* Ipswich: Golgoonooza Press, 1990, 84.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 130.

Chryssavgis also points out the eschatological dimension of cosmic liturgy. Icons transform wood and paint into windows toward sacred realities. Liturgy is also transfigurative, but instead of transforming matter, liturgy transforms time.⁷⁹ The cosmic liturgy, replete with cosmic icons, "constitutes the epiphany of God in the world and the existence of the world in the presence of God."⁸⁰ As the symbol (*sym-bolon*, which Chryssavgis etymologizes as "bringing together") of heaven and earth, the Church has a distinct role in ushering in the kingdom of God through this cosmic liturgy; in contrast, Chryssavgis recognizes the "diabolical (Greek *dia-bolos*, the one who disperses) heresy of the ecological crisis [as] the exclusion from this world of the reality of the Kingdom of Heaven, the disconnection between this world and the next."⁸¹ The cosmic liturgy is the event by which creation is celebrated and offered to God in thanksgiving.⁸² Thus, the remedy to the ecological crisis, according to Chryssavgis, is not simply to see creation in a sacramental way, but to 'do' creation in a liturgical manner. Returning to Lynn White's thesis, we might consider that the Greek East—who is largely spared of White's condemnations compared to the Latin West—offers a

⁷⁹ John Chryssavgis and Bruce V. Foltz, *Toward an Ecology of Transfiguration* New York: Fordham University Press, 2013, 157.

⁸⁰ John Chryssavgis, "The World of the Icon and Creation: An orthodox Perspective on Ecology and Pneumatology", in Barry McDonald, *Seeing God Everywhere: Essays On Nature and the Sacred* Bloomington, Ind.: World Wisdom, 2003, 254.

⁸¹ John Chryssavgis, "The Face of God in the World: Insights from the Orthodox Christian Tradition", in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Religion and Ecology* Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2017, 278.

⁸² John Chryssavgis, "Icons, Liturgy, Saints: Ecological Insights from Orthodox Spirituality", *International Review of Mission* 99, no. 2 (2010): 182.

contemplative approach that is “softer, gentler, lighter impact on creation.”⁸³

6 Ethical Implications

Having established this Orthodox response to the ecologic crisis as a crisis of vision and action, we are left with some remaining questions. What, specifically, is to be done regarding the environmental crisis? What Sherrard and Chryssavgis offer is an Orthodox response by way of cosmology, philosophy, and theology. But what is unclear from their writings are the actual actions and decisions that must be made regarding the crisis once vision and priesthood is restored. To push this further, we might say that the contributions of both authors give metanarratives and theological analyses of the sources of this crisis, but leave much to be desired in respect to the prudential judgements required for ethical actions. For example, is the consumption of meat—something absent in Orthodox monasticism—a personal choice, or should a meatless diet be considered normative for ethical Orthodox Christian living? The theoanthropocosmic vision helps us see that God’s energies permeate all things, but it does not directly inform what actions need to be taken in concrete issues. The cosmic priesthood requires that we offer the world to God, but does not lay out precise rubrics as to the way society should combat rising sea levels, air pollution, and global warming. Does the Orthodox tradition lack specificity in ecological, ethical propositions?

⁸³ John Chryssavgis, "A New Heaven and a New Earth: Orthodox Theology and an Ecological World View", *The Ecumenical Review* 62, no. 2 (2010): 219.

Looking at the work of Elizabeth Theokritoff, another Orthodox eco-theologian may help bring clarity to these questions and others. While she too reflects many of the same themes found in Sherrard and Chryssavgis, she goes a step further in suggesting practical implications that follow from Orthodox principles. Instead of merely stating *that* creation is sacramental, she offers ethical practices which confirm this belief. For example, she refers to an apocryphal tale about a Syrian monk who ate his meals extremely slowly, as reported by the sixth-century historian, John of Ephesus. When asked about his slow eating, the monk explained that he wished not to be judged for eating of God's creation, of eating without giving continual thanks for the bounty of the food without being mindful of "those who labor and sweat and toil to supply my need."⁸⁴ From this story, Theokritoff sees a move from a sacramental sense to a sacramental ethos. She draws from the story three main features of a sacramental ethos, including 1) the use of the gift of God's material creation; 2) the indissolubility of the relationship between this use and relationships with others; and 3) careful attention to time.⁸⁵ In this way, she implicitly promotes the theoanthropocosmic vision in seeing the energies of God at work in created matter, as well as a notion of "cosmic priesthood," which she develops elsewhere.⁸⁶ Theokritoff also excludes passivity and a quietist attitude towards creation. There is nothing inherently wrong with using the earth or removing things from their original place. She gives the example of the icon, which "requires trees to be felled, rocks [to] be cut or quarried, and then ground to produce pigments."

⁸⁴ Elizabeth Theokritoff, *Living in God's Creation: Orthodox Perspectives on Ecology* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2009), 192.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 192.

⁸⁶ Theokritoff analyzes the way "cosmic priesthood" is understood in various Orthodox writers in the following: Elizabeth Theokritoff, "Creation and Priesthood in Modern Orthodox Thinking", *Ecotheology* 10, no. 3 (2005): 344-363.

(198). She admits that the Church does not provide “clear answers to ethical dilemmas, or even easily-followed guidelines.” (Ibid) Proper use of the world requires careful and prayerful discernment and a posture of reverence for creation. (Ibid – 199). It also requires a Copernican revolution of sorts, whereby the dualities between ‘us human stewards’ and ‘creation-out-there’ are displaced, so that we even see “our” offering of the world to God as first God’s gift, a gift which itself has a “cosmic prehistory” (194).⁸⁷

Still, other suggestions may be helpful in this discernment. Citing the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople, she speaks of sacrifice as the “missing dimension” between theological reflection on the environment and sustainable, just practice.⁸⁸ Here, there can be a pointed critique of contemporary lifestyles. Can someone truly say that he or she sees with the theanthropocosmic vision and offers the cosmos to God as a priest when his or her lifestyle actively contributes to environmental degradation? The line between “use” and “abuse” is thin, but eco-theologians, especially in the Orthodox tradition, can help clarify ethical ramifications by applying ascetical principles to concrete environmental problems. She hints to ways in which Orthodox theology and theologians can transfer theological reflections upon the environment to practical behaviors, giving the example of Sergei Bulgakov’s writings on just economics, or even the simple, eco-friendly lifestyle of Philip Sherrard.⁸⁹ She also criticizes the common dictum, “think globally, act locally” as too short-sighted; “We are called,” she writes, “to think not just globally,

⁸⁷ Nowhere in the Byzantine Divine Liturgy (used by the vast majority of Orthodox Christians) is this more obvious than in the priest’s words while raising the Holy Gifts: “And **offering to You Yours of Your Own**, in behalf of all and for all.”

⁸⁸ Ibid., 232.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 249.

but *cosmically*; and to act not just locally, but *personally*.”⁹⁰ She contrasts the cosmic liturgical sacrifice (sacrifice in its literal meaning, “to make holy”) with cosmic pollution, where creation is not a place of our thanksgiving but our exploitation. Similarly, acting personally can involve ascetic detachment, self-discipline, and acting in a way that our active personhood is more conformed to Christ.⁹¹

7 Conclusion

In closing, a word might be said regarding the scope of this paper. As mentioned prior, the ecologic crisis is multifaceted and complex; there are no simple or easy solutions to ‘solving’ it. In a globalized world, one particular philosophy or religious tradition seems unlikely to solve the crisis, which did not arrive through a singular means. In this paper, however, I have attempted to offer an Orthodox contribution or appraisal of the crisis. Through the work of Philip Sherrard, we come to see the ways in which a misunderstanding of the cosmos and knowledge of the world can contribute to a form of arrogant blindness. For Sherrard, the predicament of modern science is primarily an issue with its method and overreaching influence on matters that transcend the empirical or observable. Once the theoanthropocosmic vision—a vision which seems to have support across the Greek patristic tradition—is restored, we see how John Chryssavgis situates the cosmic priesthood as a way of ‘doing’ the world in a way respectful of God, ourselves, and non-human creation. By understanding the cosmos as a liturgy, Chryssavgis utilizes the Orthodox traditions of icons and asceticism to show how we

⁹⁰ Ibid., 256.

⁹¹ Ibid., 255-257.

can participate as priests offering the cosmos to God. Their contributions are, in my estimation, essential to comprehending some of the roots of the ecologic crisis as one of theology. However, there remains work to be done, and Orthodox principles must extend to Orthodox ethos. Here, the work of Elizabeth Theokritoff, as briefly examined in this paper, may provide fruitful for applying the sacramental ethos to concrete situations. Returning to Lynn White's thesis, I suggest that, for whatever his gripes with Christianity as the "cause" of the crisis, it is evident today that Orthodox Christianity can be a healing balm to wounded creation.

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