

Climate Crisis and Creation Care

Climate Crisis and Creation Care:

*Historical Perspectives,
Ecological Integrity and Justice*

Edited by

Christina Nellist

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To Alexander (2yrs) and Amelia (1yr)
and the grandchildren of this world.

*And he said to them,
“Which of you, having a son or an ox that has fallen into a well,
will not immediately pull him out on a sabbath day?”
And they could not reply to him.*

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FOREWORD

It is an honor to be invited to contribute a few lines to this significant and splendid anthology of articles comprising two substantial volumes on the climate crisis and creation care. The articles collected by my dear friend, Dr. Christina Nellist, range broadly from writers of diverse religious backgrounds and convictions to writers of different scientific and scholarly interests but also to writers with specific and constructive proposals to resolve unprecedented global challenges of our time.

There is something positive and poignant about the time in which we live. It is, as His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew has repeatedly reminded us, a *kairos* moment. That is to say, it is a moment of crisis and consequence. And the Greek word for crisis (*krisis*) indicates a sense of responsibility and accountability for the way in which we respond to the unique and universal problems that we have created and face. The pandemic that wreaked havoc throughout our world for more than an entire year has - beyond the many other lessons about our mistrustful relationship with science and the destructive repercussions of the inequitable gap between rich and poor - taught us that no one is safe and no one can be saved unless everyone is safe and everyone is saved.

Let me press this analogy between Covid-19 and climate change a little further. Ironically, the strategies used to dismiss climate change and Covid-19 routinely follow a similar pattern and are regularly employed by the same people. My son recently remarked that Covid-19 ultimately provided us with a fascinating social experiment: Throughout the pandemic, he observed, we were asked to do the *slightest*, most *trivial* thing for the sake of others and the world: simply wear a mask! And yet the answer was no; still the answer was politicized; even so people refused. What, he asked, are the chances that people will respond to having less and hoarding less, or wasting less and sharing more?

Just as we cannot play politics with science (or the health of its people), we cannot play politics with climate change (or the health of our planet). Nonetheless, the greatest threat to our planet - the defining issue of our time - is not the novel coronavirus, but climate change. The rapidly growing but conveniently neglected toll from rising global temperatures will eclipse the current number of deaths from all the infectious diseases combined if climate change is not constrained. In the wake of the pandemic, even the

World Economic Forum called for “a great reset” of capitalism, arguing that sustainability will only be achieved through drastic lifestyle changes.

For thirty years, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew - and following suit, Pope Francis today - has emphasized that climate change is not simply a political, scientific, or technological issue. It is essentially and fundamentally a theological, spiritual and ethical issue. Climate change can only be reversed or resolved by addressing the moral causes of the ecological crisis. This is precisely why religion has a key role to play. And it is precisely why everyone has a vital part to play.

Now in order to appreciate this spiritual or moral worldview, we must acknowledge the world as larger than ourselves and our interests; we must appreciate creation as broader than our own conviction or confession; we must adopt a spirit of humility and simplicity. The root of the problem invariably lies in the paradigms that impel us to pursue particular lifestyles. After all, climate change is not simply the result of bad judgment or greed; it is also largely a result of oblivious success and mindless development. Far too often we are convinced that solving the ecological crisis is only a matter of acting differently, more sustainably. Let us not forget though that it is our very actions that led us to this mess in the first place.

We cannot simply continue the way have been proceeding. I wonder if we have at least learned this lesson from the pandemic. Or are we simply anxious to return to “life as normal” and “business as usual” - to life as we knew it before the crisis. Instead, should we not learn from our errors? Should we not first stop to reflect? This is the way that we have been taught by the prophets and mystics through the centuries: That we should tread more lightly, more thoughtfully and more cautiously on this planet; that we should be prepared to reverse our perspectives and practices. And here, I think, lies the heart of our problem. Because we are unwilling - in fact, we violently resist any call - to adopt simpler lives.

Our lifestyles and choices - our unquenchable demand for convenient and complacent habits - are clearly contrary and contradictory to the way of the Christian Gospel, which emphasizes both the way of the cross and the value of loving one’s neighbor. Any follower of Christ that has discovered a comfortable or privileged way of reclining on the cross is deluded at best and dishonest at worst. Any person of good will that fails to perceive the impact of our attitudes and actions for the whole world, especially the poor, is uninformed at best and unresponsive at worst.

The authors of these chapters raise valid and vital concerns about the way we treat one another, the way we handle animals and the way we manage the resources of our planet throughout historical periods and cultures, across many nations and continents. They address issues of

political urgency and economic growth, the health of human beings and sustainability of rainforests, as well as the legal rights of animals and of the earth itself. In this framework, the volumes at hand present the reader with yet another important piece of the puzzle in the lethargic, albeit pressing way that we are all called to advance from perception to practice.

John Chryssavgis

INTRODUCTION

Today, it is reasonable to suggest that most people understand that climate change is real and that it is dangerous. Whilst their level of knowledge on the subject varies (and it is likely that the majority need to know more), with children to grandparents demonstrating on the streets in countries across the world, there is at last, an acknowledgment that urgent and immediate action must be taken. Societies better understand their global interconnectedness to each other, to other creatures and to our planetary boundaries. Our presence, level of consumption and misuse of the natural world has negatively changed our atmosphere, weather patterns, oceans, environments, and the lives of the creatures within those environments. This “misuse and abuse”¹ threatens all forms of life, including our own.²

Dealing with Covid-19 has also meant dramatic changes to the way we live, resulting in our industries and economies grinding to a halt and extending the gap between rich and poor. Increasingly, we hear disparate voices repeating the same message: “we do not want more of the same”,

¹ St Gregory of Nyssa’s teaching on our gluttony and how it leads us to other forms of selfishness, is entirely pertinent for today where the richer nations’ obsession with food - evidenced for example, in the large number of media programs/focus on the subject and our wastefulness of it - is a major contributor to climate change, soil and water pollution, habitat and biodiversity loss. See ‘On Love of the Poor 1. On Good Works’, (De beneficentia). S. Holman (trans) *The Hungry are Dying: Beggars and Bishops in Roman Cappadocia*, (Oxford, OUP. 2001: 198).

² In 2000 when living in the Seychelles, I helped fund the establishment of the Sea-Level Rise Foundation by Dr Ralph Payet. We knew then that some Pacific islands were regularly flooded at high tide. Some of those islands are gone. For the impact on biodiversity loss through fire, see for example, https://www.apf.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/rp1920/Quick_Guides/AustralianBushfires.

“we want a new normal”, and “building back better” policy decisions³ and the academic world has responded with helpful analysis.⁴

These two substantial collections⁵ add to that corpus of material, as they feature chapters by specialists with expertise in different disciplines who write from different contexts, cultures and religions. They come together to write with authority and clarity on various aspects of the climate crisis and care for the natural world. They write either from faith-based or secular perspectives but share a vision and desire to explain why we are in this critical situation, ask difficult questions of us, governments, and civic leaders and explain how we might affect real change.

Regardless of their expertise, they write in the hope that we, either as individuals or as decision-makers in government and civil society, will be guided to respond to the climate crisis far more quickly than is currently the case. For without swift action, we condemn future generations of human and non-human animals, to lives of intolerable climate and social instability, with little hope of regaining what humans have squandered by our collective arrogance. More explicitly - to the certain death of billions of people and species of flora and fauna - as the ‘Hothouse-Earth’ scenario becomes a reality.

Some write with bravery on topics that are rarely discussed such as the corruption at the heart of the illegal wildlife trade; population dynamics; mass migration, and social security theories and on equally challenging subjects such as greening theological education; animals as co-workers, neighbors, food, or an extended Image of God. Others write from a scientific or legal perspective on the crisis in the Amazon; climate instability; medical unpreparedness; the failures of the animal-testing model; on the legal right to a healthy environment or protection for animals and environments.

³ E.g., International Monetary Fund, 2020b: World Economic Outlook, October 2020. A Long and Difficult Ascent, Chapter 3, Mitigating Climate Change Growth and Distribution - Friendly Strategies. Available at: <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2020/09/30/world-economicoutlook-october-2020>

⁴ This book is one example. See also, the expert analysis prepared for the Oxford Review of Economic Policy 36(S1): Hepburn, C., et al, (2020), ‘Will COVID-19 fiscal recovery packages accelerate or retard progress on climate change?’, Smith School Working Paper 20-02; Kate Raworth’s DEAL (doughnuteconomics.org) for frameworks for practical regenerative and distributive systems at local and national levels; Vallejo L., et al, (2021) ‘Halving Global CO2 Emissions by 2050: Technologies and Costs’, *International Energy Journal* 21 (March 2021) 147-158.

⁵ The second book on the theme is entitled *Climate Crisis and Sustainable Creaturely Care: Integrated Theology, Governance and Justice*, (Cambridge Scholars, 2021).

Others still, combine subjects such as eco-economics, justice and ethics, theology and dietary choices, sustainability and sacramental living, or the wisdom in First Nations' relationships with the natural world. The list is long, seemingly disparate yet interconnected, in a way oft quoted in Orthodoxy, as a communion of love and compassion.

As a theologian, educator, and lifelong conservationist, who has lived in nine countries and several continents, I have always argued that it is incumbent upon people of faith and their clergy to engage with these subjects, both individually and institutionally (locally and nationally), just as they are engaged in providing alms; justice for the poor; the provision of schools, health clinics, and feeding programs; or in the prescription of diets.

Everything is connected and interdependent. The climate emergency is real, it is imminent and without local action, millions⁶, possibly billions of people and certainly billions of animals and plants will die, if our religious institutions among others, do not 'set the scene and grasp the opportunity'⁷ given to us by God to prevent such calamities.

Brief historical reflection

In the 70s and 80s many of us were teaching or producing scientific papers on various aspects of what we now refer to as 'climate change'. During this same period, some religious leaders, such as the then Ecumenical Patriarch of the Eastern Orthodox Christian Church, His All-Holiness the Ecumenical Patriarch Demetrios 1st, expressed concern on the misuse and abuse of the natural environment. He called for individuals to change their hearts and minds, and to view the world not as something solely to be used as a resource, but rather, as something to nurture by enabling nature's flourishing.

In the case of the non-human animal creation, it is safe to say that historically, there has not been an entirely favorable Christian view of relationships with animals or their place in a world dominated by an anthropocentric mindset. Despite God's clear teaching in Judeo-Christian scripture defining a violence-free diet, closely followed by teachings on a violence-free community and concepts of blessing, flourishing, and covenant with all things in God's very good creation, we Christians have at best been blind and indifferent to, for example, the link between climate

⁶ Nearly 690 million people or 9% of the world population were undernourished and about 750 million, or nearly 10% were exposed to severe levels of food insecurity in 2019. See WMO State of the Global Climate 2020 - Provisional Report, available at: [doc_num.php \(wmo.int\)](https://www.wmo.int/doc_num.php?doc_num=1202)

⁷ Reference to Chapter Eight.

change, the animal-based diet and animal/human suffering, or at worst, have taught that animals have no value in themselves - they are 'irrationals' - nothing more than resources for the humans of this world.

We have, in the main, ignored the biodiversity of Genesis; ignored Christ's teaching in Luke 14:5 that we are to act immediately to prevent the suffering of humans and non-human animals, and ignored Matthew 10:29 where every individual creature - each tiny sparrow - is known and loved by God and through whom, we perceive the glory of God. Whilst some contemporary theologians attempt to positively reinterpret the teachings of Aristotle, Augustin, and Aquinas on animals (each of whom excluded non-human animals from moral consideration) without doubt, their negative views of non-human animals were incorporated to varying degrees, into Western and Eastern Christian thought.

Yet despite this backdrop, it was nonetheless, entirely in keeping with Eastern Orthodox Christian tradition, that in 1989 His All-Holiness Demetrios 1st, established the 1st of September (the first day of the new ecclesiastical calendar), as the day dedicated to the protection of the natural environment, calling for Orthodox Christians not only to pray for the protection and preservation of God's creation but also to change their ethos from one of domineering tyrant, to one of protector and enabler of creation's flourishing.

This work on behalf of 'creation', 'the whole world', 'nature', continues under his successor, His All-Holiness, Bartholomew 1st ⁸ culminating at this present time in the Halki Summit 111 (2019) entitled 'Theological Formation and Ecological Awareness: A Conversation on Education and the Environment'. This Summit essentially called for 'creation care' to be added to every Orthodox seminary and academic education program, and eventually, to all Orthodox parish education programs. It is important therefore, to note the chapter entitled 'Designing a Green Curriculum of Orthodox Theology: A Modest Proposal' by Professors Tsalampouni and Antonopoulou, which not only responds to the Patriarch's call, but also stands as a framework for other faiths or denominations to adapt.

A voice speaking specifically on behalf of the non-human animal creation, is rarely heard in such august conferences and to be asked to do just that, was not only a great honor for me, but also an indication that the Orthodox Christian Church is again 'setting the scene and creating the opportunity' for its clergy (at every level) and its academics, to engage with the important subjects of non-human animal suffering and salvation for all beings in God's creation.

⁸ Also known as the Green Patriarch due to his lead and commitment to the subject.

It is true, that in the 80s and 90s, progress also began to be made in the political sphere, with the 1992 Climate Convention in Rio and similar Conventions and ‘commitments of intent’, which continue until today.⁹ Yet, despite the grand words and commitments given at such important gatherings, to quote Sherrard (1998), we continue to stumble to the edge of the cliff, as if we are in some kind of collective psychosis. The obvious question to ask here is why? The answer, sadly, is because these very same governments and agencies have failed/refused to implement the necessary strategies and mechanisms to effect real change, *in the time-frame that is required to achieve said objectives*.¹⁰ This suggests that they are more concerned with short-term thinking that prioritizes re-election and short-term biased fiscal systems that favor the few, rather than in reorientating our economies in order to save the lives of their citizens, and more than that, the lives, indeed existence, of the myriad of other species on this planet.

As a theologian, I argue that this is one of the reasons why those from a faith-based worldview are important to the glocal and global debates on living sustainably in an increasingly unstable world. They can provide an alternative voice and vision for the future, based in some cases upon teachings from sacred texts, which inform us that the entire world is interconnected, delicately balanced, and sacred. They can address the human sin in the structural complexities of our world by confirming Orthodox tradition, which teaches that any exploitation and cruelty towards non-human animals and the wider creation is not only spiritually, morally, and ethically wrong, but also an insult to God and a sin. Hand-in-hand with those sins are the negative soteriological implications for the individuals who harm the created world and for those who are indifferent to that harm.¹¹ They can provide a practical holistic approach, which includes spiritual and ethical guidance on the link between climate change, a flourishing creation and socially responsible goals for a more balanced and just world. They can

⁹ E.g., European Green Deal: A European Green Deal | European Commission (europa.eu); The Paris Agreement | UNFCCC

¹⁰ See for example, 2019 IPCC Special Report Climate Change and Land: <https://www.ipcc.ch/srccl/>; 2018 IPCC Special Report Global Warming of 1.5°C, Chapter 2: Mitigation Pathways Compatible with 1.5°C in the Context of Sustainable Development; WWF Living Planet Report 2020: https://www.wwf.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-09/LPR20_Full_report.pdf

¹¹ E.g., St Cyril of Jerusalem (*First Mystagogical Catechesis on the Mysteries: To The Enlightened*, No. 6, p. 283), identifies hunting and horseracing as examples of “the pomp of the devil”, whilst the Council of Trullo Canon LI, (The Canons of the Council in Trullo, A.D. 692, *The Seven Ecumenical Councils* CANNPNF2-14) denounces hunts and forbids priests and laity from even attending such “wickedness” (Byzantine canonist Balsamon’s notes on the Ancient Epitome of Canon LI).

show that their monastic/ascetic traditions are good exemplars of a different ethos and model that can stand against the vested interests and fallacy of economic systems based upon continued growth in GDP and over-consumption, that have led us to this dangerous place. One that replaces the existing damaging model with an integrated, regenerative, and distributive system that focuses on the intrinsic value and well-being of all created beings working in harmony and balance, and importantly, one that works for all and at ground level. We are, as is often quoted in Orthodoxy, to be 'Priests of Creation', recognizing our relational ontology, rather than as destructive brutes increasingly separated from our materiality, who exploit that very material in our selfish, over-consuming, and land-grabbing choices.

Recently the world's attention has been diverted to the Covid-19 pandemic. This tragedy was completely avoidable. It has thrown into high relief our treatment and misuse of non-human animals and at last, many are beginning to understand what animal advocates have always understood - the interconnectedness and interdependence of human flourishing with the flourishing of other creatures. Increasingly, there are calls for a more enlightened relationship between humans and non-human animals, for more and more people have realized that without the end of wet-markets and intensive animal-farming systems, other pandemics will undoubtedly arise and the costs - economically, physically, and mentally - far outweigh any vested interest objections and desires to return to pre-covid intensive and abusive systems.

This pandemic has led to a reawakening to the important things in life - our families, our green spaces, and the creatures in them, clean air, and functioning health-systems. Most surprising of all, is that 'lockdowns' have been achieved with a level of civic compliance never thought possible outside of oppressive regimes. This indicates that the prospect of achieving the 'new normal' has never been more attainable. What is required now is for politicians and policy makers to ride the wave of desire for real change in our economies and societies, rather than lazily returning to the destructive policies and economic strategies of the past. It is hoped that some of them will read the chapters in these volumes, in order to gain the wisdom, they so obviously lack.

It is, however, equally important for us as individuals to realize that to achieve these changes, we must play our part by changing our desires and demands. Cheap flights, cheap meat, and cheap clothes are not cheap, if the full social, environmental, and economic cost of production, transportation and GHG emissions are considered. Cheap is a delusion fed to us by those with other agendas - with vested interests they do not wish to relinquish. The real costs: unstable weather patterns, food insecurity, polluted air,

increased water scarcity, habitat loss and species extinctions, ocean acidification, rising sea-levels¹², the beginning of mass migration, and increasing social unrest, are now only too apparent and will become increasingly so.

Some changes are relatively easy for the individual: buying green energy; flying less often or at all; driving more slowly, cycling or walking whenever possible; buying local, wasting less, giving up or reducing animal-food products and where possible, buying from local and organic farms with high animal-welfare standards; growing our own food; planting more trees; turning off the lights; avoiding fast fashion; digging up lawns and sowing meadows; avoiding plastic; reducing, recycling, reusing; lobbying our local and national governments; talking to our clerics and co-parishioners and for those who can, having less children. The list is long enough to cater for varying degrees of commitment to change, but rapid change there must be, if we and those that share our planet, are to survive.

The same is true for Faith institutions - they can, nay must, do more. Normally we avoid words like 'must', but the terms 'should' or 'ought' although more polite, do not adequately represent the urgency of our present situation. Despite the reality that some faith groups have been resistant to modernity, faith-based institutions are increasingly recognized as being integral to the healthy functioning of modern societies in their relationship with the natural world. The chapter from the Animal Interfaith Alliance¹³ is therefore also worth noting, for it draws upon the collective wisdom of ten major faith groups, many of whom have no need to 'educate' their members on compassionate care for animals or nature, because creation care is a core tenet of their belief systems.

In recent decades, whilst increasing numbers of theologians working in the fields of systematic and moral theology have shown that this is also true for Christianity, (e.g., Prof. Andrew Linzey) what is beyond doubt, is a disturbing gap between Christian theory and practice on this important subject. As an Eastern Orthodox Christian, I can show through the teachings of early church Fathers and the work of its recent Patriarchs and certainly the incumbent Ecumenical Patriarch, Bartholomew 1st, and here I include the Catholic Pope Francis, that the Christian Church can promote the best ecological practices, despite the fact, that many of its clergy of various levels are, tragically for them and their parishioners, still deeply unresponsive to their

¹² WMO State of the Global Climate 2020.

¹³ In the second book - see note 5. I declare an interest here. Our charity, Pan Orthodox Concern for Animals is a member, I am a Board member and my husband, retired Archpriest of Tanzania and the Seychelles, is one of its Patrons.

Patriarch/Pope's teachings or the subject of creaturely and environmental care, and the greening of their parishes.

As one of the pillars of civil society, it is important that faith groups understand the science relating to planetary boundaries and how each parish or faith community, not just a few, must act now to 'green' their communities in order to protect their parishioners, their families and the world in which they live.¹⁴ They must make time to teach that sacrifice for others, including the natural environment, is our duty as Image of an all-loving God. They can do so by instructing their financial departments to divest from industries and companies that harm the natural world and invest in those with high 'green', 'sustainable', and ethically just policies. Faith groups must familiarize themselves and not ignore, the serious climate impact of the animal-based diet and its delivery systems.¹⁵ In so doing, it will be easier for them to guide their clergy and members to reduce their animal-food intake; wherever possible, to provide vegan and vegetarian meals at gatherings - having an animal-based meal as a dietary option and, where possible, to purchase any animal-food from organic farms with high-welfare standards. Each local church, temple or mosque can buy and urge their faithful to buy, toiletries, cleaning products, and cosmetics that are environmentally friendly, and not tested on animals. They can increase or initiate forms of animal-blessing services in their churches, mosques, and temples or outer-courtyards where everyone can witness that all things are loved by God¹⁶ and, in relation to wild animals, they can also declare that all forms of 'sport', 'trophy' or 'recreational' hunting is a sin and an insult to God.¹⁷ Perhaps a few words from the recent Holy and Great Council of

¹⁴ See Prof Miller's chapter in this volume.

¹⁵ See D'Silva's chapter in this volume; the aforementioned 2019 IPCC Climate Change and Land report, which states that the largest potential for reducing AFOLU emissions are through reduced deforestation and forest degradation (0.4–5.8 GtCO₂-eq yr⁻¹), a shift towards plant-based diets (0.7–8.0 GtCO₂-eq yr⁻¹) and reduced food and agricultural waste (0.8–4.5 GtCO₂-eq yr⁻¹).

¹⁶ See Pan Orthodox Concern for Animals Charity's 'When Faith Meets Fur' page and 'How To' tips on our Video page and the Greek Orthodox Church of America's excellent project on 'Greening the Parish' at: greenparish.goarch.org. See the first in the series by Fr John Chrysavgis, theological advisor to His All-Holiness Bartholomew, available at: <https://youtu.be/mG4fMMon2mw>.

¹⁷ See earlier reference to St Cyril of Jerusalem. In many cases, where the rich from the West travel to Africa to kill animals, it can and is increasingly described as a modern form of colonial exploitation. Also RSPB 'State of Nature' report 2019, which found that over the last 50 years, 40 million birds have vanished from

the Orthodox Church¹⁸ would be useful in drawing this introduction to a close:

The ecological crisis, which is connected to climate change and global warming, makes it incumbent upon the Church to do everything within her spiritual power to protect God's creation from the consequences of human greed. As the gratification of material needs, greed leads to spiritual impoverishment of the human being and to environmental destruction. We should not forget that the earth's natural resources are not our property, but the Creator's: *The earth is the Lord's, and all its fullness, the world, and those who dwell therein* (Ps 23:1). Therefore, the Orthodox Church emphasizes the protection of God's creation through the cultivation of human responsibility for our God-given environment and the promotion of the virtues of frugality and self-restraint.

That books such as these are still necessary in 2021 is a tragic testament not only to our individual failures but also to the failure of successive governments and institutions across the world to a) acknowledge and act on the science and b) acknowledge the wisdom in the thousands of voices from across the world, who for decades have spoken with knowledge and sincerity on these subjects. This in part, is due to those who through ignorance or powerful vested interests, deny the climate problem or deliberately mislead people about the severity of the climate danger and, in some cases, threaten to withhold funding to a range of institutions, including the church. In equal measure, we can also add our long-term blindness and indifference to the need of others and nature, whilst promoting our own desires, and at times, destructive cultural 'traditions', such as hunting.

Finally, those still quoting 2050 in their decarbonization or 'building back better' strategies, continue to be deaf to the fast-changing reality unfolding before us. As such, *Climate Crisis and Creation Care: Historical Perspectives, Ecological Integrity and Justice* is essential reading for those involved in national/local governments and religious institutions, and for academics and students in a variety of disciplines.

the UK's skies and that around two-fifths of UK species are in decline. See Birdlife International for the huge numbers of birds shot for 'recreation'.

¹⁸ The Mission of the Orthodox Church in Today's World - Official Documents - The Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church (holycouncil.org)

PART ONE:

**HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES,
GOVERNANCE AND CREATION CARE**

CHAPTER ONE

AN INTEGRATED THEOLOGY: COMPASSION FOR ANIMALS

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What is a merciful heart? It is a heart on fire for the whole of creation, for humankind, for the birds, for the animals, for the demons, for all that exists.
—*St Isaac the Syrian* (7th century)

Introduction

A reverence for animals, sensitivity to their position, their suffering is not new. It is part of our Orthodox Church faith. We start from the principle laid down in the first chapter of Genesis - that the world is God's creation, God saw everything that He had made and behold it was very good (Genesis 1:31). The world is God's creation and it is a good, and beautiful world. Therefore, the question of animals and how we treat them, links up with our view that animals are part of God's creation and just as we should treat the whole of creation with reverence and respect, so we should more particularly treat the animals with reverence and respect. It is said in the first chapter of Genesis, that humans have a unique position in God's creation because we are created in the Image and Likeness of God, and that is not said of animals, but being created in God's Image and Likeness, gives us a responsibility towards creation as a whole and towards animals in particular.

Unfortunately, we are up against the basic problem that all too many people, clergy, and laity, think as Christians that this does not matter; that the treatment of animals is not a moral issue. But as soon as you say that animals are part of God's creation, and we humans have a God-given responsibility towards creation, then at once, one sees that it is both a moral and spiritual question. That is why the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew was so right to insist that the misuse of any part of creation is a sin but all too many people do not see it that way.

In light of both the climate crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic, we as priests, and as individual Christians, ought to have recognised the

interconnectedness of creation. This chapter aims to facilitate that recognition, by outlining several aspects of Orthodox Christian teachings that play an important role in our integrated theology. I begin with the exemplars of compassionate care - the saints.

The Saints

In the lives of Eastern Christian Saints - as among the saints of the West, especially in the Celtic tradition - there are numerous stories, often well authenticated, of close fellowship between the animals and holy men and women. Such accounts are not to be dismissed as sentimental fairy tales, for they have a definite theological significance. The mutual understanding between animals and humans recalls the situation before the Fall, when the two lived at peace in Paradise; and it points forward to the transfiguration of the cosmos at the end time. In the words of St. Isaac, the Syrian (7th century):

The humble person approaches the wild animals, and the moment they catch sight of him their ferocity is tamed. They come up and cling to him as to their master, wagging their tails and licking his hands and feet. For they smell on him the same smell that came from Adam before the transgression.¹

Many of the 20th-century stories about humans and animals come from the Holy Mountain of Athos, the chief center of Orthodox monasticism. I recall one such story, told to me many years ago. The monks in a small hermitage, as they prayed in the early morning, were much disturbed by the croaking of frogs in the cistern outside their chapel. The spiritual father of the community went out and addressed them:

Frogs! We've just finished the Midnight Office and are about to start Matins. Would you mind keeping quiet until we've finished!' To which the frogs replied, 'We've just finished Matins and are about to begin the First Hour. Would *you* mind keeping quiet until *we*'ve finished!

If we are to accept the testimony of Scripture, it would seem that animals can sometimes display visionary awareness, perceiving things to which we humans are blind. In the story of Balaam's ass (Num. 22: 21-33), the donkey sees the angel of the Lord, blocking the pathway with a drawn sword, whereas Balaam himself is unaware of the angel's presence. May it not be

¹ *Homily 82, in Mystic Treatises by Isaac of Nineveh*, tr. A. J. Wensinck (Amsterdam: Koninklijke Akademie van Wetenschappen, 1923), p. 386 (translation adapted).

claimed that animals possess, at least in a rudimentary form, a capacity for spiritual intuition?

Compassion for animals is vividly expressed in the writings of a recent Athonite Saint, the Russian monk Silouan (1866-1938):

The Lord bestows such rich grace on his chosen ones that they embrace the whole earth, the whole world within their love...One day I saw a dead snake on my path which had been chopped into pieces, and each piece writhed convulsively, and I was filled with pity for every living creature, every suffering thing in creation, and I wept bitterly before God.²

So, from the tradition of the Orthodox Church, we have plenty of examples of close mutual understanding between humans and animals. The trouble is whilst we have all this in theory, we do not sufficiently apply it in practice. I think we have to admit that this is not a priority in the minds of some bishops and priests, and they might say we are concerned with humans and to that my answer is “it is not a matter of either /or, you should be concerned with humans *and* animals.” The one does not exclude the other. All too often the animals are innocent sufferers, and we should view this undeserved suffering with compunction and sympathy. What harm have they done to us, that we should inflict pain and distress upon them? We Orthodox ought to acknowledge the contemporary science regarding animals. A very large number are living sentient beings, sensitive, and easily hurt, they are to be viewed as a ‘Thou’, not an ‘It’, to use Martin Buber’s terminology: not as objects to be exploited, and manipulated but as subjects, capable of joy and sorrow, of happiness and affliction. They are to be approached with gentleness and tenderness; and, more than that, with respect, and reverence, for they are precious in God’s sight. As William Blake affirmed, ‘Everything that lives is holy.’³ Such is the truth of the compassionate love that we are called to express towards the animals and the rest of God’s creation, that secures its place at the core of an integrated Orthodox Christian theology.

² Archimandrite Sofrony (Sakharov), *Saint Silouan the Athonite* (Tolleshunt Knights: Stavropegic Monastery of St John the Baptist, 1991), pp. 267, 469.

³ ‘The Marriage of Heaven and Hell’, in Geoffrey Keynes (ed.), *Poetry and Prose of William Blake* (London: Nonesuch Press, 1948), p. 193.

Friendship and Love

Are we to love and befriend animals? Friendship and mutual love contain within themselves an element of eternity. For us to say to another human person with all our heart “I love you”, is to say by implication, “You will never die.” If this is true of our love for our fellow humans, may it not be true of our love for animals? Those of us who have experienced the deeply therapeutic effect of a companion animal will certainly recognize that our reciprocal relationship contains within itself intimations of immortality. In the words of Staretz Zosima in Dostoevsky’s master work *The Brothers Karamazov*:

Love the animals: God has given them the rudiments of thought and an untroubled joy. Do not trouble it, do not torment them, do not go against God’s purpose. Man, do not exalt yourself above the animals; they are sinless, and you, you with all your grandeur, defile the earth through your appearance upon it, and leave traces of your defilement behind you - alas, this is true of almost every one of us!⁴

Love stands in opposition to the evil of cruelty, and this Love will be found at the core of any true Christian theology. Humphrey Primatt (18th century) was correct when he stated that “Cruelty is atheism...Cruelty is the worst of heresies.”⁵ Indeed, not only should we refrain from cruelty to animals, but in a positive way we should seek to do them good, enhancing their pleasure, and their unselfconscious happiness, for they are responsive, and vulnerable.

As Andrew Linzey rightly says, “Animals are not machines or commodities but beings with their own God-given life (*nephesh*), individuality and personality...Animals are more like gifts than something owned, giving us more than we expect, and thus obliging us to return their gifts. Far from decrying these relationships as ‘sentimental’, ‘unbalanced’, or ‘obsessive’ (as frequently happens today), churches could point us to their underlying theological significance - as living examples of divine grace.”⁶

Unfortunately, as noted above, it has to be said that, while there can be found within Orthodoxy a rich theology of the animal creation, there exists

⁴ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, tr. Richard Pervear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Vintage Classics, 1991), p. 319 (translation adapted).

⁵ Andrew Linzey, *Animal Rites Rites: Liturgies of Animal Care*, (London: SCM Press, 1999), p.151.

⁶ Andrew Linzey, *Animal Rites*, p. 58.

a sad gap between theory, and practice.⁷ It cannot be claimed that, in traditional Orthodox countries, animals are better treated than in the non-Orthodox West; indeed, the contrary is regrettably true. We Orthodox need to kneel down before the animals and to ask their forgiveness for the evils that we inflict upon them. We should not ignore the many ways in which we fall short of our pastoral responsibility towards the living creatures, domestic and wild, that God has given us to be our companions. Simply accepting or shrugging off these failings is untenable in our era because we have teachings that inform us that indifference to the suffering of any part of creation is an “unacceptable moral stance”, and a “sin”.⁸ We must examine our consciences and ask whether we as individuals or as priests, are practicing or preaching the Good News of Christ, who loves all things and extends His compassion and mercy to all His creatures. Certainly, Christian scripture and teachings are full of material to prove this fundamental theological truth.

Eastern Orthodox Christian Worship and Prayers

Many Eastern Orthodox Christians wrongly believe that contemporary Orthodox concern for animals is a modern phenomenon, but it is clear from the initial quote above, and the lives of many saints, that this is not the case. It is true that, when we look at the main act of worship, the Service of the Eucharist, we are at first sight disappointed; for in its two chief forms - the

⁷ Relatively little contemporary work had been written by an Eastern Orthodox theologian relating to animal suffering before Nellist, C. *Eastern Orthodox Christianity and Animal Suffering: Ancient Voices in Modern Theology* (Cambridge Scholars, 2020). However, material on saints and animals in both ancient and modern times can be found in numerous books, see the classic anthology by Helen Waddell, *Beasts and Saints* (London: Constable, 1934) or Stefanatos, J. *Animals and Man: A State of Blessedness* (Minneapolis, MN: Light and Life, 1992), and *Animals Sanctified: A Spiritual Journey* (Minneapolis, MN: Light and Life, 2001). There is not much from Eastern Christian sources in the following two collections (in other respects, rich and representative) edited by Andrew Linzey, *Animal Rites: Liturgies of Animal Care* (London: SCM, 1999), and (with Paul Barry Clarke), *Animal Rights: A Historical Anthology* (New York: Columbia U. P., 2004). However, more recently (2018) Fr. Simon Nellist (Orthodox) has composed a Blessing Service for the death of companion animals and for animal sanctuaries, their animals and their staff, available at the Pan Orthodox Concern for Animal Charity’s website: <http://panorthodoxconcernforanimals.org/prayers-for-creation/>.

⁸ Bartholomew 1, (Archontonis) (Ecumenical Patriarch), *Cosmic Grace, Humble Prayer: The Ecological Vision of the Green Patriarch Bartholomew*, ed. J. Chryssavgis, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2009), p.127.

Divine Liturgy of St John Chrysostom and that of St Basil the Great - there are no direct references to the animal creation. Yet, when we pray at the beginning of the Liturgy “for the peace of the whole world”, this surely includes animals. As one commentator puts it,

We pray for the peace of the universe, not only for mankind, but for every creature, for animals and plants, for the stars and all of nature.⁹

When we look at the daily office, we are not disappointed, for there we find not only implicit but explicit allusions to the animals. A notable example comes at the beginning of Vespers. On the Orthodox understanding of time, as in Judaism, the new day commences not at midnight or at dawn but at sunset; and so, Vespers is the opening service in the twenty-four-hour cycle of prayer. How, then, do we begin the new day? Throughout the year, except in the week after Easter Sunday, Vespers always starts in the same way: with the reading or singing of Psalm 103 (104). This is a hymn of praise to the Creator for all the wonders of his creation; and in this cosmic doxology we have much to say about the animals:

You make springs gush forth in the valleys;
they flow between the hills,
They give drink to every beast of the field;
the wild donkeys quench their thirst.
Beside them the birds of the air have their habitation;
they sing among the branches.

The psalm continues by speaking of storks, wild goats, badgers, and young lions and it concludes this catalogue of living creatures with a reference to Leviathan, who must surely be a whale.

Yonder is the sea, great and wide,
which teems with things innumerable,
living things both small and great.
There go the ships,
and there is the great sea monster
which you formed to sport in it.

In this way, embarking upon the new day, we offer the world back to God in thanksgiving. We bless him for all living creatures, in all their diversity

⁹ A Monk of the Eastern Church [Lev Gillet], *Serve the Lord with Gladness: Basic Reflections on the Eucharist and the Priesthood* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1990), p.16.

and abundance along with the sun and moon, clouds and wind, for the earth and the water:

How marvellous are your works, O Lord!
In wisdom have you made them all.

As we stand before God in prayer, the companionship of the animals fills our hearts with warmth and hope. Nor is it only in the service of Vespers that the animals have their assured place. In the Orthodox book of blessings and intercessions known in Greek as the *Evchologion*, and in Slavonic as the *Trebnik* or Book of Needs, there are prayers for the good health of sheep, goats, and cattle, of horses, donkeys, and mules, and even of bees, and silkworms. Up to the present day, the great majority of Eastern Orthodox Christians dwell in an agricultural rather than an urban environment; and so, it is only natural that their prayer - rooted in the concerns of this world as well as being otherworldly - should reflect the needs of a farming community. In daily prayer as in daily life, humans and animals belong to a single integrated community. As a typical example of a prayer for living creatures, let us take these phrases from a blessing on bees:

In ancient times you granted to the Israelites a land flowing with milk and honey (Exod. 3:8), and you were well-pleased to nourish your Baptist John with wild honey in the wilderness (Matt. 3:4). Now also, providing in your good pleasure for our sustenance, do you bless the beehives in this apiary. Greatly increase the multiplication of the bees within them, preserving them by your grace and granting us an abundance of rich honey.¹⁰

A prayer for silkworms includes the words:

All-good King, show us even now your lovingkindness; and as you blessed the well of Jacob (John 4:6), and the pool of Siloam (John 9:7), and the cup of your holy apostles (Matt. 26:27), so bless also these silkworms; and as you multiplied the stars in heaven and the sand beside the sea-shore, so multiply these silkworms, granting them health and strength: and may they feed without coming to any harm...so that they may produce shrouds of pure silk, to your glory and praise.¹¹

Until quite recently, we have generally ignored the insect world. Now, we are beginning to recognize both their importance for human flourishing via

¹⁰ *The Great Book of Needs* (South Canaan, PA: St Tikhon's Seminary Press, 1999), vol. 4, pp. 382-3 (translation adapted).

¹¹ *Evchologion to Mega*, ed. N. P. Papadopoulos (Athens: Saliveros, no date), p. 511.