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Chapter Author(s): Metropolitan John (Zizioulas) of Pergamon

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## PROPRIETORS OR PRIESTS OF CREATION?

*Metropolitan John (Zizioulas) of Pergamon*

### I

**T**he development of ecological awareness and sensitivity in the last years has led to the use of various models of speaking about the relation of the human being to nature.<sup>1</sup> The prevailing model is that of *steward*: the human being is the steward of creation. This terminology has become widespread not only among secular ecologists but also among religious ones, and especially among the latter. We encounter it in almost every reference by theologians to the ecological problem. The idea of stewardship is a useful one mainly from the point of view of what it intends to exclude, namely, that the human being is the lord and proprietor of creation. Such an understanding of the human being as a proprietor of creation found support in modern times mainly in two areas: the anthropology of the Enlightenment and Western, particularly Protestant, theology.

The Enlightenment found its typical representatives in this respect in such thinkers as Descartes, Francis Bacon, and even Kant. In the words of Descartes, the development of science would make human beings *maîtres et possesseurs de la nature*, and Francis Bacon in an almost brutal way invites humanity to treat nature as its “slave.” Kant, on the other hand, understood humanity’s relationship to nature as that of a “judge” whose function is to exercise rational and moral judgment on nature, directing it in accordance with what the human being considers to be right or wrong, good or bad for it.

Protestant theology, on the other hand, particularly in the Calvinist tradition, did its best to exploit the biblical verse “Subdue and have dominion over the earth” (Gen. 1:28) in order to promote, directly or indirectly, capitalist

views of work and economy, as Max Weber has demonstrated so clearly. Without such religious ideas, the appearance of the ecological crisis would probably be difficult to explain historically.

The replacement of the model of proprietor and possessor with that of steward of creation may be useful in order to exclude the undoubtedly unacceptable view that the human being is the lord of creation or may behave as such a lord. Ecologists recognized this and adopted the model of stewardship. However, a closer examination of this model would reveal to us its limitations and disadvantages from the ecological viewpoint.

1. Stewardship implies a *managerial* approach to nature. The Greek word *oikonomos*, which stands behind the notion of steward, points to the capacity of the human being to “manage” a given “property” and make “use” of it, albeit within the limits of what has been “entrusted” to humanity. In this sense stewardship resembles what the English mean by the function of a “trustee.” A utilitarian implication in the relation of the human being to nature seems to underlie this model. Equally significant is the underlying conception of nature as a “thing” and an “object” to be managed, arranged, rearranged, distributed, etc. by the human being.

2. Stewardship suggests a *conservatist* attitude to nature. The steward is the “guardian” of what is given to him or her, called to conserve it, albeit, as we have just noted, while managing it. This conservatist approach to our relation to nature seems to overlook two important truths. On the one hand, the human being is not called only to “guard” but also to “cultivate” nature, that is, to improve its capacities and help it grow and bring forth fruit. On the other hand, human intervention has already reached such proportions that it would be unrealistic and futile to speak of sheer conservation of the environment. Certain parts of the environment may still be capable of conservation, but other parts have undergone irrevocable changes, and any attempt to preserve them would be unrealistic and in some cases even undesirable.

Thus, the idea of stewardship, much as it is useful to indicate our objection to the view that the human being is the lord and proprietor of creation—a view that accounts historically to a considerable degree for the appearance of the ecological crisis—has its own limitations and would appear to be problematic from the ecological point of view. It may be, therefore, necessary to complement it with another model, namely with what we may describe as *the priest of creation*. Such a model seems to emerge naturally from the Patristic and liturgical tradition of the Orthodox Church, but its existential

meaning is universal. The word "priest" is part of religious language, and for this reason it may appear to have a significance limited only to religious people. We shall try to show that this is not so. But to do that we must first clarify our anthropological presuppositions. We cannot tackle the idea of what man—in the sense of *anthropos*, that is, both male and female—is. (From now on we shall use the word "man" in this sense and not in its gendered usage.)

## II

What is the being that we call "man"? It is not only theology that tries to answer this question but also science and philosophy. Although each of these three disciplines has something different to say, they cannot but also have something common about this matter. Otherwise there would be no common ground and, therefore, no possibility of a dialogue between them.

For science—and for biology in particular—the human being is very closely connected with what we call animals; he or she is another animal. This view has prevailed in biology ever since Darwin produced his theory of evolution. Although this may sound rather disturbing to theologians, we must bear in mind, as we will see below, that it is important for all of us to remember this connection of the human being with the rest of the animals. Biology approaches the human being as another animal with higher qualities than those of the rest of the animals but with many things in common as well, including intelligence and consciousness. Attributes such as these used to be attached exclusively to human beings in the past. But for biological scientists today, the human being is, in a certain sense, basically an animal.

Philosophy tries to give a different view of the human being. Although it admits that the human being is an animal, it distinguishes man from the animals in one important way. In the past, philosophers made this distinction by saying that humans were specially characterized by intelligence or rationality. However, ever since Darwin showed that intelligence can also be found in other animals and that the difference is a matter of degree and not of kind, philosophy no longer insists on rationality as the special characteristic of man.

The difference seems now to lie in the fact that whereas other animals adjust to the given world—and sometimes they manage that very well, much better than the human being—the human being wants to create its own world, to use the existing world in order to make something specifically human out of it. This is why the human being produces tools of its own, which are used to exploit nature. But more significantly, it treats nature as a

raw material from which it creates new realities, as is evident particularly in the case of art. Only the human being can see a tree, for example, and make another tree out of that, a tree which is “his” or “her” tree, bearing the personal seal of the person who painted it. Thus it is creativity that characterizes the human being, and this we cannot find in the animals. Man is a creative being. This is very important, as we will see later, for ecology as well.

In his attempt to be creative and to create his own world, man is normally frustrated, because he tends and wishes to create, as God does, out of nothing and to be fully free from what is given to him as his environment, his “world.” It is because the human being has this tendency to use the natural world for his own purposes that he can be both good and bad for creation. The human being can exploit creation in such a way as to subject it to himself and in this way make the natural environment suffer under his dominion.

All this indicates that what distinguishes the human being from the animals is freedom expressed as creativity, as the free creation of something new. There are two ideas here to remember that will be very important for our subject. The first we draw from biological science, and that is that the human being is organically and inseparably linked with the natural world, particularly with the animals. The second is that although he is united with the rest of creation, man tends to rise above creation and make use of it in a free way, either by creating something new or sometimes by simply destroying what is “given” to him.

With these thoughts from science and philosophy in mind, let us now ask what theology thinks the human being is. For theology, the human being is not only related to the rest of creation but also to another factor, one that science does not want to introduce and that philosophy sometimes does but very often does not—namely, God. For theology, God is crucial in order to know what the human being is. The human being must emerge as something different, as a different identity with regard to the animals, with regard to the rest of creation, and also with regard to God. Thus man is a link between God and the world. This is what is expressed in theological terms through the idea of the “image and likeness of God.”

In the Bible, when man was created, God said: “Let us now create man in our image and likeness.” What does that mean? What does it mean that the human being is an image of God? This has been discussed throughout the centuries, and I will not bother you with all this complex discussion. Instead, I will simply mention that one of the elements that the Fathers saw as expressing this “image of God” in man is rationality (*logos*), that man is a *logikon zoon* (“rational living being”), and that it is through his rationality

that he reflects the being of God in creation. However, *logos* or “rationality” had a particular meaning at that time, and it had mainly to do with the capacity of the human being to collect what is diversified and even fragmented in this world and make a unified and harmonious world (*cosmos*) out of that. Rationality was not, as it came to be understood later, simply a capacity to reason with one’s mind. Instead, as the ancient Greeks thought of *logos*, it is man’s capacity to achieve the unity of the world and to make a *cosmos* out of it. Man has the capacity to unite the world.

There is also another element that was stressed by the Fathers as expressing the “image of God.” This is what Gregory of Nyssa calls the *autexousion*—the freedom of the human being. The animals do not have a *logos* in the sense of acquiring a universal grasp of reality, nor do they have freedom from the laws of nature; the human being has to some extent both of these things, and that is very important for him in order to be, as we shall see, the priest of creation. Another aspect of the image of God in man—or rather, another aspect of what man is or represents for theology, particularly Orthodox and Patristic theology—is that man is the “prince of creation” and the microcosm of the whole of creation. One of the Fathers who wrote in the seventh century, St. Maximus the Confessor, developed this idea in particular, namely that in the human being we have the whole world present, a sort of microcosm of the whole universe. Because the human being has this organic link with creation and at the same time the drive to unite creation and to be free from the laws of nature, he can act as the “priest of creation.”

### III

The priest is the one who freely, as himself an organic part of it, takes the world in his hands to refer it to God and who, in return, brings God’s blessing to what he refers to God. Through this act, creation is brought into communion with God himself. This is the essence of priesthood, and it is only the human being who can do it, namely, unite the world in his hands in order to refer it to God so that it can be united with God and thus saved and fulfilled. This is so because, as we said earlier, only the human being is united with creation while being able to transcend it through freedom.

This role of the human being, as the priest of creation, is absolutely necessary for creation itself, because without this reference of creation to God the whole created universe will die. It will die because it is a finite universe, as most scientists accept today. This is theologically a very fundamental belief: the world was not always there but came into being at some point and, for this reason, will “naturally” have an end and come into nonbeing one day.

Therefore, the only way to protect the world from its finitude, which is inherent in its nature, is to bring it into relation with God. This is because God is the only infinite, immortal being, and it is only by relating to him that the world can overcome its natural finitude and its natural mortality.

In other words, when God created the world finite and therefore subject by nature to death and mortality, he wanted this world to live forever and to be united with him—that is, to be in communion with him. It is precisely for this reason that God created the human being. This underlines the significance of man as the priest of creation who would unite the world and relate it to God so that it may live forever.

Now, the human being did not perform this function, and here lies for theology the root of the ecological problem. The human being was tempted to make himself the ultimate point of reference, that is, God. By replacing God with himself—that is, with a finite created being—man condemned the world to finitude, mortality, decay, and death. In other words, the human being rejected his role as the priest of creation by making himself God in creation.

This is what we call in theology the “Fall of man.” When this occurred, God did not want the world to die and brought about a way of restoring this lost communion between himself and creation. The Incarnation of the Son of God was precisely about this. Christ is the one who came in order to do what Adam did not do, namely, to be the priest of creation. Through his death and resurrection, Christ aimed precisely at this unity and communion of the whole of creation with God, at the reference of creation back to God again. It is for this reason that Christ is called the “second Adam” or the “last Adam” and that his work is seen as the “recapitulation” (*anakephalaiosis*) of all that exists, that is, of the entire creation.

Now it is this role, which Christ performed personally through his cross and resurrection, that he assigned to his Church, which is his Body. The Church is there precisely to act as the priest of creation who unites the world and refers it back to God, bringing it into communion with him. This takes place in the Church particularly through the sacraments.

The meaning of the sacraments, for example that of baptism, is that through it the attitude of the fallen Adam is reversed. Man dies to his claim to be God in creation and instead recognizes God as its Lord. Through the path of asceticism, the Church educates man to sacrifice his own will and his self-centeredness and subject himself freely to the will of God, thus showing that man has reversed the attitude of the first Adam. Finally, through the Eucharist, the Church proclaims and realizes precisely this priestly function of humanity. The Eucharist consists in taking elements from the natural

world, the bread and the wine that represent the created material world, and bringing them into the hands of the human being, the hands of Christ who is the man *par excellence* and the priest of creation, in order to refer them to God.

At this point, it is important to remember—especially those of us who belong to the Orthodox Church and are familiar with the Orthodox Liturgy—that the central point in our Liturgy is when the priest exclaims: “Thine of Thine own we offer unto Thee.” This means precisely that the world, the creation, is recognized as belonging to God and is referred back to him. It is precisely the reversal of Adam’s attitude, who took the world as his own and referred it to himself. In the Eucharist, the Church does precisely the opposite: the world belongs to God, and we refer it back to its Creator through the priestly action of Christ as the real and true man, the head of the Body of the Church.

#### IV

Let us now look briefly at the ecological significance of all this.

1. The understanding of the human being as priest rather than steward of creation means that the role of man in creation is neither passive (conservationist) nor managerial, that is, “economic.” (The notion of “economy” is deeply linked with that of management, that is, the idea of arranging things according to and for the sake of *expediency* not only in political but also in ecclesiastical language.) The human being is related to nature not *functionally*, as the idea of stewardship would suggest, but *ontologically*: by being the steward of creation the human being relates to nature by what he *does*, whereas by being the priest of creation he relates to nature by what he *is*. The implications of this distinction are very significant. In the case of stewardship our attitude to nature is determined by ethics and morality: if we destroy nature we disobey and transgress a certain law, we become immoral and unethical. In the case of priesthood, in destroying nature we simply *cease to be*; the consequences of ecological sin are not moral but existential. Ecology is in this way a matter of our *esse*, not of our *bene esse*. Our ecological concern becomes in this way far more powerful and efficient than in employing the model of stewardship.

2. The idea of priest of creation gives to ecology a *cultural* dimension. The word “culture” must be taken in its deepest meaning, which is the elevation of an otherwise transitory and ephemeral entity to something of lasting and even eternal value. When an artist creates, he or she wishes to bring about something of eternal value and significance. The priest is in this sense an

artist: he takes the material world in his hands (the bread and the wine, for example, in the case of the Eucharist, which are perishable by nature) and lifts it up to acquire eternal divine meaning. In such an approach the entire *raison d'être* of ecology undergoes a profound change. We do not ask people to respect the environment simply for negative reasons, such as the fear of destruction, etc.—this would be an ecology based on fear. We ask people to take a *positive* view of ecology, something like an attitude of *love* toward nature. As priests rather than stewards we *embrace* nature instead of managing it, and although this may sound romantic and sentimental, its deeper meaning is, as we stated above, ontological, since this “embracing” of nature amounts to our very being, to our existence.

3. Such a cultural dimension of ecology implies that the protection of nature is not contrary to the *development* of nature. The human being is the priest of creation in the sense that the material world he takes in his hands is *transformed* into something better than what it is *naturally*. Nature must be improved through human intervention; it is not to be preserved as it is. In the Eucharist we do not offer to God simply grain or wheat and grapes but bread and wine: natural elements developed and transformed through human labor, in our hands. Ecology is not preservation but development. The model of priest is in this sense far more suggestive and rich than that of steward. It does not, however, bring us back to the model of proprietor, since in the case of priesthood the development of nature through the intermediary of human hands does not end up with the human being and its interests but is referred to God.

Ecology and development have always been, as we all know, two terms that require some kind of reconciliation. (There is always the fear among developing countries that ecology has been “invented” as a means of keeping them underdeveloped.) This is indeed the case if the development of nature has as its ultimate purpose the satisfaction of human needs. But in a priestly approach to nature we develop it not to satisfy our needs as human beings but *because nature itself* stands in need of development through us *in order to fulfill its own being* and acquire a meaning it would not otherwise have. In other words, there is a development of nature that treats it as *raw material for production* and distribution, and there is a development that treats nature as an entity that must be developed *for its own sake*. In the latter case, although the human being is not passive, simply preserving or sustaining nature, he is developing nature with respect for its, and not his, interests, taking care of its fragility and its “groaning in travail,” to remember St. Paul’s moving expression in Romans 8.

## V

I have tried to describe the model of priest of creation in its ecological significance. I hope I have shown some of the advantages that this model may have for ecology compared with other models, especially that of stewardship. I am fully aware that the way things are going with regard to ecology, none of these models would save us. I nevertheless think that the moralistic approach to the ecological problems expressed through such words as "responsibility" has to be complemented with a cultural approach. Our ecological crisis is attributable not so much to a wrong ethic as to a bad ethos; it is a *cultural* problem. In our Western culture we did everything to desacralize life, to fill our societies with legislators, moralists, and thinkers, and we undermined the fact that the human being is also, or rather primarily, a *liturgical* being faced from the moment of birth with a world that he or she must treat either as a sacred gift or as raw material for exploitation and use. We are all born priests, and unless we remain so throughout our lives we are bound to suffer the ecological consequences we are now experiencing. We must allow the idea of priest of creation to reenter our culture and affect our ethos. An ethic that is not rooted in ethos is of little use to ecology.

