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PRESERVING GOD'S CREATION THREE LECTURES ON THEOLOGY AND ECOLOGY

JOHN D. ZIZIOULAS

Editorial Note

We publish here the first of three lectures given by Professor Zizioulas at King's College, London, on January 16, 23 and 24, 1989. We hope to publish the other two in future editions of the journal. We are printing them as they were given, without revision, and not in the final form in which their author may eventually wish to develop them.

LECTURE ONE

INTRODUCTION

The subject of these lectures has to do with one of the most pressing and critical issues of our time. It is becoming increasingly evident that what has been named "the ecological crisis" is perhaps the number one problem facing the world-wide human community of our time. Unlike other problems this one is marked by the characteristic that it is a *global* problem, concerning all human beings regardless of the part of the world or the social class to which they belong, and that it is a problem that has to do not simply with the well-being but with the *very being* of humanity and perhaps of creation as a whole. It is, indeed, difficult to find any aspect of what we call "evil" or "sin" that would bear such an all-embracing and devastating power as the ecological evil. This way of describing the ecological problem may still sound to some ears as a gross exaggeration, and yet there are hardly any serious and responsibile scientists and politicians today who would not agree with it. One has simply to look at the New Year issue of *Time* magazine in order to get a taste of the seriousness with which leading scientists from all quarters of the scientific world warn us about the situation. If we follow the present course of events, the prediction of the apocalyptic end of life on our planet at least is not a matter of prophecy but of sheer inevitability.

In view of this situation what does theology have to offer to humanity? The first obvious thing to be mentioned is that theology cannot and should not remain silent on an issue like this. If faith is about ultimate things, about life and death issues, this particular problem certainly falls within that category. Christian theology and the Church can hardly be excused for staying silent for such a long time on this matter. Particularly since, and not without good reason, they have both been accused of having something to do with the roots of the ecological problem. They, Church and theology, have to speak on this matter not so much in order to apologize and offer explanations in view of such accusations, but in order to offer their constructive contribution to the solution of the problem. For they must have something constructive to say on a matter like this. Otherwise they risk being irrelevant and unable to live up to their own claim to the Truth. For a truth which does not offer life is empty of all meaning.

If we try to identify the direction in which our Western societies are going regarding possible solutions to the ecological problem, we shall immediately realize that all our hopes seem to be placed in *ethics*. Whether enforced by State legislation or taught and instructed by Churches, academic institutions, etc., it is ethics that seems to contain the hopes of humankind in the present situation. If only we could behave better! If only we could use less energy! If only we could agree to lower a bit our standards of living! If, if . . . But ethics, whether enforced or free, presupposes other, more deeply existential motivations in order to function. People do not give up their standards of living because such a thing is "rational" or "moral". By appealing to human reason we do not necessarily make people better, while moral rules, especially after their dissociation from religious beliefs, prove to be more and more meaningless and unpleasant to modern man.

The experience of two world wars and their destructive consequences in our century came as a blow to the optimism of the eighteenth and nineteenth century prophets of the Enlightenment who thought that the way things were going, with the cultivation of reason and the spread of knowledge, the twentieth century would be the era of human paradise. Humanity does not always behave rationally and cannot be made to behave so either by force or by persuasion. There are other forces, besides the human intellect, that decide the direction in which the fate of the world moves. Theology and the Church ought to embrace areas other than the ethical – that is, the rational prescription of behaviour – if they are to be of any use in this case. Such areas must include all that in the pre-Enlightenment world used to belong to the mythological, the imaginative, the Sacred. We did our best in the post-Enlightenment world to destroy the mythological, to leave the non-rational to the *Belles Lettres*, which we separated sharply from hard thinking philosophy, and we thus destroyed "world-view" (the accent on *world*), the understanding of the world in which we live as a mysterious, sacred reality broader than the human mind can grasp or contain, a "cosmic liturgy" as the seventh century Greek Father St Maximus the Confessor would describe the world.

Of course, the fear of Paganism and all that it implies can justify a great deal of the attitudfe that led to sheer rationalism. But there could be, as indeed there have been, other responses to this fear than the total dichotomy between nature and history, the sacred and the profane, reason and myth, art and philosophy, etc., which have marked our modern way of thinking in the West. Certainly the Church and theology ought to have found better ways to respond to such a fear than the way of separating the rational from the mythical, the sacred from the secular. For they are, after all, claiming that faith in Christ implies a unity between the transcendent and the immanent, and an *anakephalaiosis* of all in the Person of Christ. Appealing, therefore, only to the ethical solution, as so many Christians seem to do today, would only reinforce the reasons that led to the ecological crisis in the first place. If we try to solve the ecological problem by introducing new ethical values or re-arranging the scale of the traditional ones, I fear that we shall not go very far in reaching a solution.

In the course of these lectures I shall try to show why I think we stand in need of a new culture in which the *liturgical dimension* would occupy the central place, and perhaps determine the ethical principle. If I were to give an overall title to this effort, a key notion for what I shall be trying to say to you here, this would probably be that of *Man as the Priest of Creation*. I used this expression in Patmos last summer in the context of the International Environmental Conference that took place there in connection with the 900th anniversary of the founding of the Monastery of St John, the author of the Book of Revelation. I feel that our culture stands in need of a revival of the consciousness that the superiority of the human being as compared with the rest of creation consists not in the reason it possesses but in its ability to *relate* in such a way as to create events of communion whereby individual beings are liberated from their self-centredness and thus from their limitations, and are referred to something greater than themselves, to a "beyond" – to God, if one wishes to use this traditional terminology. This man can do, not as a thinking agent but as a *person* – a notion that needs to be defined further in the course of these lectures. The notion of "priesthood" must be freed from its pejorative connotations and be seen as carrying with it the characteristic of "offering", in the sense of opening up particular beings to a transcending relatedness with the "other" – an idea more or less corresponding to that of *love* in its deepest sense. In all this the underlying assumption is that there exists an interdependence between Man and Nature, and that the human being is not fulfilled until it becomes the *anakephalaiosis*, the summing up of nature. Thus, Man and Nature do not stand in opposition to each other, in antagonism, but in positive relatedness. This cannot be achieved in any other way except through liturgical action, because it is only through such action that Nature is involved itself in the very event of this positive relatedness. Man has to become a liturgical being before he can hope to overcome his ecological crisis.

But before we come to an analysis of this thesis, we must become aware of the factors that have led to the present crisis and of the tools that history offers us towards its overcoming. A quick look at history is, therefore, our immediate task in these lectures.

I. A Glance at History: A. The First Centuries

The American historian Lynn White writing about the historical roots of the ecological problem in 1968 was quite categorical in attributing this problem to the Western intellectual tradition with its rationalistic view of man, and in assigning to theology and the Church an important role in this development. Regardless of the extent to which one agrees or disagrees with this judgement of a contemporary historian, it can hardly be disputed by anyone that history must have something to teach us about the roots of the present crisis and that religion, and Christianity in particular, being a dominant force in the shaping of our culture throughout the centuries – at least up to the Enlightenment – must have had some role to play in the background of this crisis. It will be necessary, therefore, to go back to the earliest stages of Christian history and to try to identify the forces that may have led to the subsequent developments up to our time.

If we accept the view that classical Christianity took shape in the context and perhaps under the influence of two cultures, the one dominated by the Hebrew or Semitic and the other by the Hellenic way of thinking, it would be instructive to try to see in what ways these two cultures conceived man's relationship to nature, and the place that God occupied in this relationship.

With regard to Hebrew and Jewish culture which formed the original milieu of Christianity, historians on the whole agree that the Hebrew mind tended to attach decisive importance to *history* (the history of the elect people of God in particular) and to see God as revealing Himself mainly in and through His acts in history. Nature played a secondary role in this revelation, and very often such a role was totally denied to it under the influence of an obsession with the fear of paganism that threatened the specific identity of the people of Israel.

This preoccupation with history rather than nature resulted in the development of prophetism at the expense of cosmology in Hebrew culture. Prophetism looked at the events marking the history of Israel, of other peoples – the "nations" – and often of individuals, and was concerned with the final outcome of these events. God was expected to reveal Himself in the final event that would supersede and at the same time give meaning to the previous events, and this final event – the *eschaton* as it came to be called in the Greek speaking Jewish communities of the New Testament period – would be all that mattered to the Hebrew mind.

Greek culture, on the other hand, attached little significance to history. In fact very soon in the circles of philosophers and scientists of classical Greece history was even looked upon with distrust and suspicion as the realm of change, flux and disorder. Nature offered to the Greek the sense of security he needed, through the regular movement of the stars, the cyclical repetition of the seasons, and the beauty and harmony which the balanced and moderate climate of Attica (at *that* time) offered. Cosmology was the main concern of the Greek philosophers who saw God present and operating in and through its laws of cyclical movement and natural reproduction. Even minds as cultivated and as reflective theologically as Aristotle could not avoid worshipping the stars, while Plato, the theologian *par excellence* of classical Greece, could reach no further than a creator God who would be an artist creating a universe in accordance with pre-existing matter, space and ideas.

This comparison between Hebrew and Greek attitudes to nature, allowing of course for all qualifications necessary to a generalized presentation of things such as the present one, implies, among other things, two points that are of immediate interest to our subject.

(a) The Hebrew mind seems to lack cosmological interest, while the Greek lacks prophetism. If Christianity were to make use of both Hebrew and Greek cultures it ought somehow to arrive at what may be called "cosmological prophecy". It is this that I believe we find for the first time in the book of Revelation in which a Christian prophet following the best of typical Hebrew tradition rises above history and views the fate not of

Israel alone but of *creation*, i.e. of the *natural world*, from the angle of eschatology, of God's final act in history. Cosmological prophecy is thus seen as a new type of prophecy, and this marks the beginning of a new approach to Man's relationship with nature, which the Church would pick up and develop further later on.

(b) The comparison between these two cultures that lie at the root of classical Christianity reveals that whereas for the Greek the world was a reality which contained in itself sufficient energy to live for ever – hence the understanding of the universe as eternal – for the Hebrew the world was itself an *event*, a gift, that ought to be constantly referred back to its Creator in order to live. At this point the Early Church had to combine a world-view that trusted nature for what it was – i.e. believed in its rationality, in its *logos* or *logoi* – and one that regarded it as a *gift* and an *event*, constantly dependent upon its Creator and Giver. It is out of this combination that early Christianity developed its "Eucharistic cosmology", which like cosmological prophecy took a view of the world as *finite* and subject to its limitations in its nature, nevertheless as trustworthy and capable of survival in and through its being referred back to its Creator. Thus, in a typically Greek fashion the world would be conceived as good and beautiful and would occupy a central place in man's consciousness, but its beauty and permanency and centrality in man's preoccupation would constantly depend on an event of reference back to what is not the world or nature, that is, to God. Thus, the earliest eucharistic prayers of the Church being composed in the best of typically Hebrew liturgical tradition, would involve a blessing over the fruits of the earth, but this would be done in such a way as to involve also an affirmation of faith in the survival of Creation and nature, as if this survival – and not simply the survival of a people or of the human being – were central in the Church's consciousness.

To sum up this point, both cosmological prophecy and eucharistic cosmology, which emerged out of the encounter between Hebrew and Hellenic thought on Christian soil, involved the view that the world is an *event* and not a self-explainable process, but that owing to another *event*, namely its being referred to the eternal and unperishable Creator, it can be said to *be* permanent and to survive. It is at this point that the responsibility of Man as the one who refers the world back to the Creator arises and forms the basis of what we have called here his capacity to be the "Priest of Creation".

But we shall discuss this point later on in the course of our lectures. At the moment let us continue with our brief look at history.

What we have said so far shows that in primitive Christianity cosmology and interest in nature occupied a central place in the Church's consciousness, but this was done without falling into Paganism, owing to the fact that the reality or nature of the world had to be conditioned by an *event* – the event of referring the world to God. Thus, whereas in paganism faith in the survival of the world emerges from faith in the world's eternal and inevitable self-perpetuation, in Christian cosmology the world is contingent and contains in itself no guarantee of survival except in so far as it is in communion with *what is not world by nature* – not with what is part of nature – namely God as understood in the Bible. The crucial point therefore, in the survival of the world lies in the act or the event of its communion with God as totally other than the world. Man's responsibility becomes in this way crucial for the survival of nature.

II. A Glance at History: B. The Middle Ages

All this describes the situation with regard to the first two or three centuries of the Christian era. Things, however, seem to change gradually, and the Church is eventually led to a seriously modified consciousness with regard to the relationship between Man and Nature. Very briefly the decisive steps in this development can be described in the following way.

1. A strong influence of Platonic and Gnostic dualism in the second and third centuries had the result of undermining the importance of the material world and regarding it at best as irrelevant and at worst as evil. The Christian Gnostics of Alexandria, above all the extremely influential Origen, represent classical examples of this development. Origen in particular who was widely read by the monks of Egypt influenced a considerable part of Eastern Monastricism which was fortunately rescued from this influence by monastic forces such as that of, Macarius of Egypt and St Maximus the Confessor.

2. In the West similar developments tended to introduce a dichotomy between Man and Nature by regarding the former as superior to the latter, and as the centre of everything. Typical examples of this development are to be found in St Augustine and Boethius, who defined the human being, or even the divine being, in terms of reason and intellect, and introduced consciousness and introspectiveness as the supreme aspects of human and indeed divine existence. Thus the human being was singled out from nature as being not only a higher kind of being but in fact the sole being that mattered eternally – apart of course from the angels who, owing to their spiritual and immaterial existence, were of an even higher value than the human souls. The kingdom of God in St Augustine's vision of the last things has no place for nature; it consists of the survival of spiritual beings, of the eternal souls. The Church was gradually losing consciousness of the importance and eternal value of the material creation, and this was particularly evident in the way it treated the sacraments and the Eucharist in particular: instead of being a blessing over the material world, the fruits of nature, and a reference of it with gratitude and dedication to the Creator, the Eucharist soon became primarily a memorial service of the sacrifice of Christ and a means of grace for the nourishment of the *soul*. The dimension of the cosmos soon disappeared from sacramental theology in the West giving its place to a soul- or spirit-centred world-view.

3. The Middle Ages and the Reformation did little to change this situation having in fact reinforced through Scholasticism the idea that the *imago Dei* consists in the *reason* of man. The sacraments still remained to a large extent in the West irrelevant to the material world, and the gap between Man and Nature widened even further. Descartes following the Augustinian tradition made the

thinking subject the centre of everything ("cogito ergo sum"), while the Enlightenment strengthened even further the view that the thinking rational being is all that matters in existence. Romanticism, while paying attention to nature, reinforced the dichotomy between the thinking, conscious subject and the non-thinking, non-conscious nature, clearly giving superiority to the former and allowing the latter to be of value only in so far as it contained in itself the presence of the former. Pietism, mysticism and other religious and theological movements still operated without any reference to nature, while Puritanism and mainstream Calvinism exploited to the utmost degree the Genesis verse urging man to "multiply and to dominate the earth", thus giving rise to capitalism and eventually to technology and to our present-day civilization.

III. A Glance at History: C. Modern Times

To this man-centred and reason-dominated world-view, to which Christian theology has contributed the main factor, our modern Western world managed to produce two intellectual forces that acted as anti-bodies, both however outside the area of theology and the Church, which even remained for the greatest part hostile to these forces.

1. The first of them was *Darwinism*. A blessing in disguise as we might call it, Darwinism pointed out that the human being is by no means the only intelligent being in creation – a blow to the Scholastic view that the image of God in man is his reason and intellect – and that consciousness, even self-consciousness, is to be found in animals, too, the difference between them and Man being one of *degree* not of *kind*. Thus, Man was thrown back to his organic place in nature, and the question remained open as to what constitutes his difference from the animals, given now the fact that reason is no longer the *special* difference. The Church by defending on the whole its reason-centred culture failed to respond constructively to the challenge of Darwinism and preferred either to enter into antagonistic battle with it, or to succumb to it, by accepting its downward looking anthropology and refusing to seek in areas other than reason the difference of the human being. But Darwinism by having virtually won the science of biology for itself is still there, and theology has to make the best use of it – both positively and negatively – not least for the sake of overcoming the ecological crisis.

2. The second set of anti-bodies to this inherited man-centred and reason dominated culture of ours came in modern times from the area of natural philosophy through *Einstein* and the subsequent schools of modern quantum-physics. Here the blow was of a different and perhaps deeper kind. In the first instance it signified the end of the dichotomy between *nature* or substance and *event*. Everything that *is* at the same time *happens*, space and time coinciding one with the other. The world itself is an event, and cannot be conceived apart from an *act*, one might say a ritual, that takes place all the time. In addition, we have the blow on the subject-object structure dealt by quantum-mechanics. The observer and the observed form an unbreakable unity, the one influencing the other. The universe in its remotest parts is present in every single part of it. Even what is called by a certain school of natural philosophy "the anthropic principle", in spite of its anthropocentricism, cannot apply to a world-view in which Man can be isolated from the rest of the universe. Natural science as well as biology press hard on theology in our time demanding a review of our traditional theology. I believe that this pressure can be of decisive benefit to the Church in its attempt to face the ecological problem. This, however, presupposes a creative use of all the new developments in the areas of biological and natural sciences in connection with whatever Christian tradition can offer for the same purpose. Such elements from the Christian tradition can be drawn from the following areas of classical theology, especially from that of the Patristic era.

IV. Positive Elements From Tradition

1. From the liturgical experience of the ancient Church, the following elements must be underlined:

(a) All ancient liturgies, especially in the East, involve a sanctification of matter and of time. There is no introspective and self-conscious attitude of the human soul in the ancient liturgies, everything aimed at the involvement of the praying individual in an event of communion with the other members of the worshipping community and with the material context of the liturgy. Apart from the bread and wine, themselves parts of the material world, the ancient liturgies tried to involve all of man's senses in the liturgical event: the eyes through the icons and the liturgical vestments; the ears through hymns and psalmody; the nose through the smell of incense, etc. In addition to that, the prayer for "seasonable weather, for the abundance of the fruit of the earth, etc." places the liturgy right in the middle of creation.

(b) All ancient liturgies seem to be centred not so much on the consecration of the elements, even less so on a psychological anamnesis of the Cross of Christ, but on the *lifting up of the gifts of bread and wine to the Creator Father*, what is called in all the ancient Greek liturgies the *Anaphora* (= the lifting up). Liturgiologists today tend to stress this forgotten detail, which can be of particular significance for a theology of creation. For it attaches at least equal centrality – if not more – to Man's act as the priest of creation as it does to God's act of sending down the Holy Spirit to transform the offered Gifts into the body and the blood of Christ. This forgotten aspect was so central in the consciousness of the Early Church as to lend itself for identifying and naming the entire Eucharistic Service: in the ancient Church the service was called, not without significance, purely and simply *Anaphora* or *Eucharistia*, both terms having to do with Man's priestly action as representative of creation.

In this connection it must be also underlined that all ancient Eucharistic liturgies began their eucharistic prayer or canon with thanksgiving for *creation* in the first place, and only afterwards for redemption through Christ. In certain cases, like that of the eucharistic liturgy commented upon by St Cyril of Jerusalem in his *Mystagogical Catecheses*, the thanksgiving for creation seems to be the only point

of the eucharistic canon with no mention at all of the sacrifice of Christ. Of course, this was not the norm, but it can serve as an illustration of how central the reference to creation was in the ancient liturgies. The priestly aspect of the Eucharist – and this is worth underlining – did not consist in the notion of sacrifice, as it came to be understood in the Middle Ages, but in that of *offering* back to God His own creation. It is a great pity, indeed, that sacrificial notions came to occupy the meaning of priesthood for centuries. It is a pity not so much because this gave rise to endless controversy between Roman Catholics and Protestants, preventing them from reaching a common mind on the Eucharist even today, but mainly because it has meant the loss of the dimension of creation from the notion of priesthood. It is important, therefore, to recover and restore this dimension for the purpose of facing the ecological problem.

2. A second area besides the eucharistic liturgy in which the ancient Church can help us recreate our theology today is that of *Asceticism*. Here things need some explanation, for asceticism has been normally associated with hostility or in the best of cases with contempt towards the material world. With the exception of certain trends in ancient monasticism that were under the direct influence of Origenism, asceticism was by no means associated with neglect or contempt of the material creation. In the earliest *Gerontikon* (collections of stories about monks and their sayings) we encounter stories of ascetics who wept over the death of birds or who lived in peace with wild animals. Even today on Mount Athos one can encounter monks who never kill serpents, but co-exist peacefully with them – something that would make even the best of Christians among us shiver and tremble.

Besides this respect for nature, it must be noted that it was in the circles of the desert theologians especially that the idea developed in the East that the "image of God" in Man is to be found also in his *body*, and not simply in his mind. Indeed, asceticism was accompanied in the Early Church by the breaking of one's own selfish will so that the individual with his or her desires to dominate the external world and use it for their own satisfaction may learn not to make the individual the centre of creation. This is a spirit which is needed in order to teach modern man how to solve the ecological problem. But it should not be taken as part of an *ethical* education, for then it would lead nowhere. It can only be meaningful if, combined with the liturgical experience, it creates an *ethos* rather than a prescribed rule of behaviour, and it is in this sense that it can be useful to theology, which in turn can be helpful in facing the problem of our time.

One could add to the list of elements borrowed from tradition many others, such as the use of space and matter in architecture, the use of colour and shape in painting, of sound in music, etc. In general, it is, as I said at the beginning, a matter of *culture* which theology must aim at. But for the purposes of this first lecture, it may suffice to stop at this point. We have seen how history has contributed to the emergence of the ecological problem and how it can contribute to its solution. But history cannot be repeated and reconstituted intact. Nostalgic voices of a return to Byzantine forms of art are abundant today among the Orthodox. We do not intend to offer here any support to such voices: our modern world has passed through changes that make a return to the past impossible, and therefore undesirable. Theology today must use the past with respect, for it has indeed managed to overcome paganism without falling into gnosticism, and it must try to learn from that. But it must try to adjust it to the present by creatively combining it with whatever our contemporary world has achieved or is trying to achieve in all areas of thought – science, art, philosophy, and the rest.

In the remaining two lectures we shall attempt to discuss in some depth the aspects of tradition that we believe can be of positive value in facing the ecological crisis today. We shall try to say something more about the idea of Man as the Priest of Creation, and about how this can affect our culture. We do not, of course, claim for a moment that the ecological crisis will be solved as soon as our lectures end. But we hope that these modest reflections may not be altogether irrelevant to the task facing theology in these critical times of ours.