

**Religion, Science and the Environment**  
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**The Adriatic Sea: A Sea at Risk, a Unity of Purpose**  
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**TOWARDS AN ENVIRONMENTAL ETHIC**

Metropolitan John of Pergamon

Your All Holiness,  
Your Beatitude,  
Your Excellency, the President of the Albanian Republic,  
Your Excellence, the Prime Minister of Albania,  
Eminencies,  
Excellencies,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

**Introduction**

It is a great pleasure and a distinct honour and privilege for me to deliver to such a distinguished audience the keynote address at our Fourth International Symposium organised by Religion, Science and the Environment, sailing along the Adriatic coast, a geographic area of immense cultural significance as well as enormous environmental problems. It is precisely in an area like this that the question is inevitably raised in our minds: why and how has humankind reached such a deplorable situation in which its most beautiful cultural achievements can exist side by side – for how long, we may wonder? – with the worst and saddest environmental destruction? How is it possible that the same human being can create an admirable culture and destroy their natural environment at the same time? Are we not faced with a schizophrenic situation that must signal alarm to our conscience? Religion and Science cannot evade this question, for they share a great deal of responsibility both for the appearance of this lamentable situation and for finding ways to correct it. We, religious leaders and leading scientists, are gathered here precisely for this reason.

The first thing that emerges from what we have just said is that we all stand in need for repentance. In an earlier address to the first of our symposia I spoke about the urgent need to revise our traditional concept of sin so as to make it include the sin not only against our fellow humans but also nature. The words I used at that time were the following: ‘We are used to regarding sin mainly in social terms. But there is also sin against nature. Evil is not a matter for human beings but affects the entire creation. This morality still awaits to find its place in our Christian consciences.’ This is a fundamental prerequisite of all ethic, namely the consciousness of sin. Sin is not an exclusively religious notion. It does not necessarily require an external forensic authority such as God or the Law, moral, civil or otherwise. It can be understood, as in the case of the Greek Orthodox Christian tradition, as a failure to achieve an end, an *astochia* (meaning to miss the mark). The human being was created with a purpose which in the Christian Orthodox tradition is called *theosis*. Man was created ‘in order to till it (the Earth) and care for it’, according to the Book of Genesis (2.15). There was a purpose in the creation of the human being. And it is the human failure to fulfil

this purpose that constitutes the essence of sin. This takes away the juridical and forensic character attached to sin, particularly in the Western Christian tradition, mainly since St Augustine, and places it on the ontological level which relates to the human being rather than mere acting, to existence rather than just behaviour and action. This is important for any attempt to work out an environmental ethic. An ethic which is based on what the human being does is very different from an ethic founded on what the human being is. It is important, therefore, to establish our environmental ethics on existential rather than moral grounds, i.e. by looking primarily not into the human actions but into the attitude and existential orientation that lead to a certain ethical behaviour. It is only on such a basis that an environmental ethic can demand universal persuasion and acceptance, something that is so necessary in the case of an ethic of this kind.

### **Ethics and Ethos**

There is a fundamental difference between ethics and ethos which affects directly the subject of the environment. Putting it simply, ethics has to do with principles worked out consciously or even rationally, and perhaps intellectually, whereas ethos relates to symbols, emerging from shared everyday experience in a particular community. Such symbols unite a particular community in a certain common attitude towards life, and give expression, or even form, to the very 'way of being' (*tropos hyparxeos*) to the how people are in relation to everything that is. In this sense ethos is spontaneous and not conscious behaviour, it is the fundamental pre-conscious substratum of all culture, something that is taught, not intellectually, but through the acceptance of the world view into which a human being is brought without any intellectual effort from the very moment of his or her birth.

Viewed in this way, ethos requires two conditions in order to exist. The first is a community united around a common world view. The second is symbols through which this common world view is shared, expressed and communicated in the community. Without these conditions ethos results into sheer custom or praxis which can be easily abstracted as individual behaviour and become prone to intellectual criticism and finally dismissed. The function of symbol is crucial because it guarantees that ethos would remain communal in character (the preposition *sym-* makes it impossible to conceive symbol individually), while implying participation through means borrowed from ordinary practical experience in a reality that transcends praxis into being, i.e. into the way we exist in relation to all that exists. Thus symbol is what protects praxis from falling into activism, i.e. into an ethic of doing without being, with no ontological basis or content.

Contrasted with this, ethics is traditionally dissociated from ethos in that it claims an authority based on imperatives drawn from reason, i.e. from a conscious consideration of what is right. This proves to be the weak point of ethics in that the answer to the question of what is right depends eventually on the world view one holds. For example, in a Platonic and in a broader sense ancient Greek world view right is what does justice to the kosmos, beauty, and harmony of the universe, which is to be reflected in human behaviour. To the Roman mind and its subsequent development in Western culture right is what is useful and does no harm. The approach is essentially utilitarian. It is also determined by what nature dictates (acting *kata physin*) since in a

sense nature contrasted with human arbitrariness somehow manages to avoid doing harm and produces useful results.

Finally, in our post-modern pluralism right seems to depend on particular contexts and situations that may be totally unrelated to one another both spatially and temporally. All this shows that a pure ethic which is not somehow rooted in ethos is conceivable theoretically but can have no practical significance. We may teach people what is ethically right to do, but in order to have this applied in their lives it will be necessary to insert it into their ethos.

All this is particularly relevant to the question of the environment. Why does ethics play such an insignificant role in the attitude of our contemporary societies towards the natural environment? Why are people so un-ethical today with respect to nature? Is it because modern societies are un-ethical in general, i.e. because there is no such a thing as ethics taught at school and assumed in the way our societies are organised? On the contrary, ethics seems to occupy a central place in Western societies, but it is a kind of ethics that has been disassociated from ethos and a deep separation has occurred between what ethics teaches at the level of knowledge and what people spontaneously do in their everyday life as a result of the world view into which they are born and brought up. We therefore need an environmental ethic, but what sort of ethic should that be?

These questions bring us to the heart of the problem we are dealing with in our gathering here. To some of us present here the purpose of our dealing with the subject of environmental ethics is to enrich the existing ethics with some clauses which will invite people to behave better towards the environment. Allow me to doubt that such a thing would be worth our while. There are certainly many things to be added to the ethics taught at schools or in churches about the respect we owe to our natural environment. Some of them have already been proposed by others, for example the “Earth Charter Campaign” or institutions such as the United Nations, WWF etc. Our Symposium may add new proposals for the formation of an ethical code for the environment. But I believe that as religious leaders and scientists we must go deeper into the issue. We must be ready to propose not simply an ethic but an ethos, and to root our ethical demands deep in human existence and not simply in human behaviour. We must be prepared to ask not simply how people should behave, but why they must behave in a certain way. What are the compelling reasons for their ethical behaviour apart from fear and utility which can be easily dismissed as exaggerations? What kind of existential reasons suggest or necessitate an environmental ethic?

### **Anthropocentrism versus Biocentrism**

Ethics may prove to be illusory and deceptive, if what it proposes and demands is contrary to what really exists. This seems to be the case with regard to anthropocentrism versus bio-centrism. An environmental ethic that would demand from the human being to regard itself as small and insignificant compared with the rest of nature would be not only un-biblical but also unrealistic and ontologically false. The very definition of human involves the claim (in biblical terms the call) to be God, i.e to regard humanity as the crown and prince of creation, as someone called to and tending to have dominion over creation. There can be no environmental ethic doing justice to human being, if it curves and eliminates this tendency. And it is

beyond any question that such an ethic would have no chance to be applied. The human being will always want to transcend its boundaries and go beyond the world given to it. This is what freedom is about as an ontological and not as a merely moral concept, distinguishing the human being from animals.

The question of the proper relation of the human being to non-human life in the universe is of paramount significance for environmental ethics. It would be totally misleading to denounce anthropocentrism by forbidding all human intervention into nature on the ground of respect for the sanctity of life. Human intervention in nature is not in itself evil. On the contrary, it is often benevolent for nature itself. This is another proof of the superiority of the human being compared with other forms of life in creation. Man is privileged with the freedom to intervene and allow nature to develop in a healthy manner, be it in the case of non-human or of human nature itself. Science and technology, therefore, are not to be condemned for all their interventions in nature, but only for those affecting the fundamental relations that make up existence.

Existence is relational. This means that all that may be said to exist is a combination of unity with otherness, communion with diversity. In the natural world this is realized in the form of species. There is not a single species without some form of direct or indirect relationship with the rest of the species. The human being itself depends for its existence on such a relationship. It is the merit of the idea of evolution to have made this truth quite clear. Anthropocentrism is not anthropomorphism. It is only when the former falls into the state of the latter that it becomes evil. Humans are central but not independent in creation; they are themselves a species.

The ecological crisis is a result not of anthropocentrism but of anthropomonic tendencies in human attitudes and behaviour. An environmental ethic has to take this distinction into account. Human interventions in nature, including the human body itself (for there is rapidly developing through biotechnology an ecological crisis with regard to the human being itself), must be purified from all tendencies to treat certain species as unnecessary for humanity itself or to abolish the boundaries between species. Anthropomonic tendencies are to be condemned not simply for moral but for ontological reasons: the human being itself will cease to exist, if such tendencies prevail. There is already talk of a meta-anthropocentric era as an emerging possibility.

### **Social Ethics as Environmental Ethics**

If we root environmental ethics in existence rather than in morality itself (in moral rules possessing an intrinsic value in themselves), it will emerge as obvious that there is an inevitable interaction between human relationship with nature and the way human beings relate to one another. It was not by accident that classical Greek thought linked so closely together cosmic and social behaviour by using the same word for both, namely Kosmos. It is also equally significant that in the Biblical tradition, particularly the Prophets, natural catastrophes are regarded as consequences of transgression of justice in human relations. By being relational human existence involves interdependence and interaction simultaneously between human beings themselves and the nature they commonly share.

The consequences of this truth for environmental ethics are very important. Any disturbance of humanity's relation with nature affects automatically all human beings regardless of their social status. It is an illusion, albeit so widespread today, that by exploiting the environment, the rich get the benefit and the poor suffer injustice. The truth is that both of them are affected negatively (in terms of health, for example) even if the rich profit economically. Equally, the lack of justice in social relations, the increase of poverty in certain parts of the world etc lead to an increase in exploitation of natural resources on the part of the poorer as a means of survival or as an attempt to achieve the economic standards enjoyed by the rich. The environmental crisis reveals the close connection between social and ecological ethics and the need to include the one in the other.

### **The Ethics of Creativity**

The human being is distinguished from the rest of creation not so much because it possesses reason, as if the other creatures were 'irrational'. The difference between humans and animals with regard to rationality is one of degree, not of kind, as Darwin has convincingly demonstrated. The main specific characteristic of the human being consists in the ability to take in their hands the existing world and create out of it a new world, bearing the seal of its human creator. Certain Church Fathers, e.g. St Photios the Great, saw in creativity the essence of the imago Dei, i.e. the Biblical idea that God created the human being in His image and likeness. Other Fathers, e.g. St Gregory of Nyssa, placed the imago Dei in freedom, while church writers such as St John of Damascus in rationality understood as freedom. All of these views amount to the same thing: the human beings alone in all material creations display the tendency to create a new world out of the given one. Not simply to manufacture or produce, but to create. Animals also produce but they do not create; art in the sense of the emergence of a new entity, bearing the personal seal of the creator and marked by personal uniqueness, is the characteristic par excellence of humanity.

This ability of the human being to treat nature as in a sense 'raw material' for a new creation is a double-edged sword that accounts to a great extent both for culture and for the ecological crisis. The human being can use nature both in order to produce and in order to create, but in the case of producing nature is treated as matter; it is reduced to the state of a thing, of useless and formless material, into substance and elements. In the case of creating, nature is approached as a source of inspiration and is freed from its limitations in order to become in a sense a participant in human existence itself, by acquiring so to say a personal identity and becoming part of an I-Thou rather than an I-It relationship, to use the language of Martin Buber..

If this distinction is brought into the subject of environmental ethics, the implications will be significant. It is clear that at the root of the ecological crisis lies the human use of nature as material for production. This is legitimate, as nature offers itself also for that purpose. But the tragedy is that today humans see in nature nothing more than material for production, and forget that nature exists also in order to offer material for creativity. By turning nature into a means of production the human being destroys simultaneously the beauty of nature and his own creativity. Our present culture witnesses to that.

An environmental ethic, therefore, must remind the human beings of their privilege to be creators and not simply manufacturers and producers. This would make it necessary to sustain nature by treating it in a way that its use for production would not endanger its function as a means for creativity.

### **The Ethics of Priesthood**

The distinctive characteristic of the human being is to be able to regard the world not only as a sum of materials that can be analysed and used, but also as a whole, as an integral totality. Not only religion but also physical science today poses questions about the beginning and the end of the universe, its finitude or infinitude, as if the universe were a totality, an integral whole. It is certainly the unique privilege of the human beings to ask such questions, owing to what the ancient Greeks called logos, i.e. the ability to gather beings into a single being, almost as if it were a living animal with a soul of its own (to remember Plato).

If this characteristic of humanity is taken into consideration, humans are by definition led to the question whether this 'being' called universe is self-explicable and self-existent or it should be referred to some entity other than itself. At this point scientists would remain silent – or indifferent- whereas religions would split into two categories: those who would regard the world as the creation of a creator, and those who would see the world as possessing the explanation of its existence within itself. It is the first category to which the Judeo-Christian religion tradition belongs, and it is mainly on the basis of this tradition that this particular paragraph is written. It may, however, have to say something to the rest of the participants too.

There is much talk about the human being as a 'steward' of creation, by which it is meant that humans are not 'lords' and possessors of creation but only guardians and managers of it. This imagery cannot explain satisfactorily the active role that the human being is called to play in creation, through the benevolent interventions to which we referred earlier on. It avoids also and obscures the fact that humans are themselves an integral part of nature. We need, therefore, a concept that would express both of these things at once. Such a concept, at least for the Judeo-Christian tradition, is that of humanity as the priest of creation.

Priesthood is a notion loaded with ideas of sacramentalism not easily acceptable beyond a certain part of Christianity. The true meaning, however, of this term is to be found in the idea of offering, together with and at the same time on behalf of a community. If this is applied to the human being in its relation to nature, it means that the mission of humanity in creation is to gather it into one whole and refer it back to its creator, both as thanksgiving (*eucharistia*) and as communion (*koinonia*) with the Creator. This is done while the human being itself remains an integral part of creation and at the same time distinct from it as the only being endowed with the capacity to unite the world in a single reality.

If this image is followed to its implications concerning the environment, it will mean that we need to ground ethics in what we may describe as liturgical ethos. If we recall what we said above about ethos, nature offers itself not only for production, not only for creativity, but also for symbolism, which as we noted, is so essential to the function of ethos. In our rationalistic world we have lost the reality of symbol – we

transferred it to psychology which makes full use of it, yet with no reference to our relation with nature. And yet the entire creation is for the human being full of symbols. It is a 'cosmic liturgy' to recall St Maximus the Confessor. Is it not a pity that modern Western man has ceased to see and treat nature as a source of symbol giving form and expression to his ethos? This is a loss which has something to do with the inability of humanity to establish and live a proper relation with nature.

### **Towards an Eschatological ethic**

Nature is not a static entity, and humanity's relation to it is not static either. We cannot develop an environmental ethic without taking into account the future. According to the Greek Church Fathers, notably St Maximus the Confessor, Man's place in nature is tied up with a purpose, which is to bring creation its communion with God and make it share in theosis of man Himself. Creation needs the human being just as much as the human being needs it. The prevailing among ecologists argument that nature can do without the human being, since it has in fact existed without it for a long time, overlooks the eschatological character of the world's existence. According to the Church Fathers – and also to those among the physical scientists who subscribe to the 'Anthropic Cosmological Principle' - everything in nature points to the coming of the human being whose existence gives meaning to the universe. This is so because there is a teleology built into creation, a forward-looking orientation which is related with the human presence.

Such a forward looking ontology cannot but have important consequences for environmental ethics. Thus, it is imperative for the human beings to ask whether their behaviour and actions contribute to the fulfilment of nature's destiny or constitute a hindrance to it. In any case the fact that creation must have a future, and this future has been entrusted to the human being places on humanity an immense responsibility.

The same responsibility applies also to the consideration of the fact that the kind of environment we hand over to the future generations of humanity is entirely the responsibility of the human being at each particular time. An environmental ethic which is eschatologically orientated cannot but stress this point. There seems to be a scandalous indifference concerning this matter in our societies today. This can only be attributed to the loss of the eschatological orientation in modern man.

### **Conclusions**

We may now conclude by making the following points:

1. There can be no environmental ethics without an environmental ethos. Teaching human beings to behave ecologically requires an experiential framework which is provided by culture shaping people's attitudes to life before they come to a conscious grasp of what is right and what is wrong. People relate to their environment and form their attitudes to it long before they acquire an ethical conscience. It is on this soil that environmental ethics can grow and bear fruit.
2. Ethos requires culture and culture presupposes a world-view shared by the community. Individualism cannot be reconciled either with culture, or

consequently with environmental ethos. It is necessary to recover the experience of community if we wish to obtain an efficient environmental ethos.

3. The ecological crisis we are confronted with does not stem only from human greed and a wrong hierarchy of values. It has to do also with the fact that human beings have lost their natural contact with their environment, their sense of belonging to nature, their sacramental approach to nature which would enable them to celebrate and incorporate nature into their relation with God and with one another. This 'liturgical' attitude to nature is essential to environmental ethics.
4. If these observations are accepted, the question that follows immediately is whether it is at all possible in the existing culture, shaped as it is by western values, to work out an environmental ethic of the kind described above. We live in a world in which man is alienated more and more from both community and nature. Modern Western man understands only the language of values and has lost almost all organic contact with nature (people grow up with not having touched or even seen a lamb or a donkey, so why feel any organic relationship with them?) It would seem, therefore, inevitable to use in ethics the conceptual framework of values, if we are to work out an environmental ethic for western man. What we should aim at may be a translation of ethos into values so that our Western mind can grasp in its own terms what it means to relate to nature in the right way. But the application of these values in actual life will always remain problematic without a deeper transformation of culture in the direction of a closer and more organic relation of humanity with nature. The ecological problem has always been, and will always be in the final analysis a matter of culture rather than ethics. This does not mean that ethics should be neglected or left to wait until the proper culture emerges. It does mean, however, that ethics has its limitations and that only by drawing from culture can it bear fruit in actual life. Universal ethical values, such as respect for the sanctity of life, humility, justice, asceticism etc cannot be applied outside a particular cultural context (for example, you cannot have asceticism in an individualistic culture) and yet you cannot wait until our culture denounces or eliminates individualism in order to develop an environmental ethic. You have to preach these universal values even if you know that cultural conditions hinder their application. In this sense you can propose an environmental ethic in the form of universal ethical values, but at the same time you must bring up the cultural problems that make such values difficult to apply. You must, in other words, call for cultural transformations, for cultural repentance.

In conclusion, what I have tried to say in this presentation is to underline the need to work out an environmental ethic that would be based on an environmental ethos. This is not an easy task but I trust that this symposium possesses enough wisdom to contribute to the fulfilment of this task in a satisfactory way.