

Toward a Better World – Principles of Christian Ecotheology

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Abstract: The present study analyzes the current ecological crisis from the premises of Christian theology and highlights the ways in which ecotheology can offer authentic responses to the problems of the contemporary world. In a society dominated by consumption, technology, and a utilitarian approach to nature, the human being gradually distances himself from both creation and God, losing the profound meaning of existence. Christian ecotheology proposes a reconstruction of human consciousness through the rediscovery of the world as a divine gift, through the assumption of responsibility toward creation, and through the restoration of the relationship of communion between the human person and the cosmos. Thus, the study emphasizes that environmental protection cannot be reduced to technical solutions but requires a spiritual and ethical transformation of the human being, who must once again perceive nature not as an object to be exploited, but as a space of encounter with God. Only through such an inner change can a better world be built—one aligned with the will of the Creator and with the human vocation to be His co-worker in preserving and ennobling creation.

Keywords: Christian Ecotheology, Ecological Crisis, Consumerism, Ecological Responsibility, Human–Nature Relationship, Christian Anthropology, Ethics of Creation

Introduction

The universe has its origin in divine love, which stands at the foundation of existence, and creation was brought into being in harmony, beauty, and conformity with the Truth. Yet through the misuse of freedom, the human being came to distort both his own nature and the world in which he lives. Humanity's effort to rediscover its authentic connection with all of creation and with God could be fully accomplished only through the coming of Christ, who—out of sacrificial love—restored and redeemed all humankind. Today, unfortunately, society has slipped even more deeply into mentalities devoid of sacredness. If in the past the metaphorical “death of God” was proclaimed—replacing the center of existence with the human being—at present we are witnessing an intensified degradation of the human person, now regarded as almost non-existent within the order of values. We live in a period dominated by excessive consumption, accelerated rhythm, and manipulation, and what people seek no longer corresponds merely to real needs but expands into unlimited desires. This leads gradually to the physical, psychological, and spiritual exhaustion of the person, squandering the divine gift of life.

Even more dramatic is the fact that the human being irresponsibly destroys the natural environment—the very space he should protect and preserve in a healthy state. It becomes polluted or irreversibly damaged, and the consequences will, over time, threaten the very existence of the human species. It is essential that the human being assume responsibility for the effects of his actions, for he bears full accountability for the current social, economic, cultural, and ecological situation.

What Is Ecotheology?

This new direction of systematic theology—also known as constructive theology—called *ecotheology*, seeks to create the necessary framework for orienting the world toward what is good and for restoring a correct direction of development. Its aim is to offer humanity the perspective

of salvation from the process of self-destruction that it consciously or unconsciously sustains. Ecotheology may be understood as a branch of systematic theology that focuses on the connections between faith and the natural environment, especially concerning contemporary ecological crises (Conradie, 2006, p. 3). Methodologically connected to ecology, the discipline seeks to present the way in which the Orthodox tradition interprets and addresses the challenges related to the human living environment, considered in its entirety.

The central themes of ecotheology can be grouped into several major categories, each with specific areas:

- Climate change and its consequences: rising global temperatures, burning of fossil fuels (gas, oil, etc.), intensification of the greenhouse effect;
- Protection of nature: safeguarding animal and plant species, diminishing pollination processes, supporting endangered fauna;
- Responsible management of energy and increased efficiency of non-renewable resources;
- Polluted air and its artificial modification;
- Soil degradation;
- Contamination of water sources;
- Production, accumulation, and use of nuclear energy;
- Depletion of resources: excessive consumption, uncontrolled exploitation, intensive fishing and hunting, deforestation;
- Toxic waste and technological debris discarded into the ecosystem;
- The selfish interest of human beings regarding the environment.

These subjects represent only a portion of the aspects that must be addressed in order to awaken human responsibility concerning the risk of losing control over the natural world. Many issues of contemporary consciousness have not been treated with adequate seriousness either by society or by human reason—reason being God's gift, referred to in scientific and philosophical circles as *systemic wisdom*, an expression of the Creator of all visible and invisible reality. Theology, in collaboration with science, ecology, sociology, philosophy, psychology, and other fields, seeks to offer concrete solutions to these global crises. Answers can arise only through cooperation, with each discipline contributing its own insights so that a common understanding of truth may be reached, as it manifests in reality.

Contemporary society is called to protect life and to reject any form that leads toward death, and bioethics has the mission of “affirming and supporting human responsibility toward life in all its stages and manifestations” (Colectia, 2011, p. 9). Orthodox ecotheology seeks to awaken within the human being a responsible attitude toward the environment in which he lives—an environment considered a gift received from God, a space where freedom can be exercised only through the assumption of the consequences of one's actions (Rotaru, 2019, pp. 214-215). The human being is obliged to administer and care for the world, not to treat it with disdain. When a person relates egocentrically, seeking only immediate benefits, this reveals a rupture from the spiritual dimension. As a result, the conscience weakens, reason becomes isolated and transforms into an autonomous center, and the human being moves from *being* to *having*, degrading inwardly. This orientation leads to a type of rationalism in which God is perceived only as an obstacle or as a factor limiting freedom—a freedom that the human being wrongly understands as excess and abuse.

Today, the human being nourishes almost exclusively the body, while the spiritual dimension—the one that distinguishes him from the animal kingdom and opens the path to deification—remains “thirsty,” like arid soil. The laws of nature show clearly that whatever does not receive nourishment cannot survive. The human being is called to strive for holiness, through devotion to God founded on respect and reverence, not to descend into an instinctual level or into a confused existence lacking identity and purpose (Mencinicopschi, 2007, p. 27).

Ecotheology emerges as a discipline meant to clarify the way in which earthly life becomes preparation for the life to come. The time lived here is insignificant compared to the eternity in which the human being is called to become “god by grace,” in unceasing communion with the personal God, source of holiness and of gifts (Berdiaev, 2009, p. 11).

The modern human being allows himself to be drawn into a consumerism manifested in three directions: the consumption of pleasure, matter, and energy. In all these areas, he becomes the executioner of his own person and of nature. He exploits the environment for hedonistic satisfaction, exhausts his inner resources, and destroys himself. Therefore, instead of living more healthily, he ends up suffering from diseases caused predominantly by excessive rhythm and an imbalanced lifestyle; only a small percentage stems from hereditary or genetic causes (Dulcan, 2020, p. 80). The human being must remember that he is a person called to communion with others, in order to form a united community and to transform the entire world into a space of sanctification. Continuing the unrestrained exploitation of nature leads not only to environmental degradation but also to the ruin of his own life, for which he will answer before God. Ecotheology represents a warning addressed to the contemporary human being—regardless of profession—because it speaks to the person himself, called to fulfill “the plan of God” and to carry his cross both vertically and horizontally (Niță & Codresi, 2011, pp. 5–6).

The planet is intensely experiencing the crisis of today’s human being, who no longer finds his true identity. The ecological imbalance present in many areas originates from the excessive exploitation that the human being—like a despotic ruler—has exercised without discernment. The real problem lies in the lack of correct evaluation: what does one gain and what does one lose through one’s own actions? Material wealth has no value if one is left without a safe place to live; money obtained through the destruction of nature cannot compensate for the deterioration of the quality of life. Unlike the human being, nature operates according to an internal, harmonious logic that does not waste intelligence and often manages to self-regulate without human intervention.

Today’s human being must understand that he can be both a theologian and an ecologist—an *ecotheologian*—precisely by respecting the principles established by the Creator throughout His work, becoming aware that no one can oppose the divine will. When the human being reconciles with nature, he is, in fact, drawing closer to God, the giver of all creation (Petcu, 2023, p. 540).

Material Interests – the Central Ecotheological Problem of the Postmodern World

It is necessary to acknowledge that the reality of today’s world can no longer be considered normal, especially when we analyze the effects produced by excessive consumption, exaggerated production, and the increasingly intense use of non-renewable resources—or even of those that regenerate, but only over intervals so long that the planet can no longer restore them at the rhythm required for human survival. For this reason, numerous specialists warn of the approach of a “zero point,” both regarding the global economy and the availability of natural resources. Beginning in 2008, the earth can no longer supply humanity with what it once offered, and one of the central factors of the tension between financial and ecological interests is petroleum—a non-renewable resource clearly heading toward depletion in the coming decades (Bran et al., 2011, pp. 73–78).

The current economic crisis paradoxically causes an even greater increase in consumption, which leads to an accelerated extraction of raw materials from nature. Through this repetition, the intensely exploited resources eventually cease to sustain life in any real way. It is therefore essential to look lucidly at what is happening in the contemporary world: environmental degradation is intensifying against the backdrop of growing production—not necessarily in quantity but in diversity. The situation becomes even more dramatic when we consider that approximately 800 million people—especially in Africa and South America—

suffer from hunger, a reality that reflects a major imbalance between human needs and nature's capacity to respond (Food and Agriculture Organization, n.d.).

It must be stated once again that many of these difficulties originate from the narrow interests of groups or corporations that promote only the appearance of the common good while actually pursuing profit regardless of human or ecological cost. Their goal is not the real resolution of global crises but only the maintenance of superficial stability—sufficient to continue financial accumulation by any means, even when these lead to the disappearance of numerous species of plants and animals (Bookchin, 1999, pp. 19–23). We are witnessing the gradual destruction of this world created by God, in the name of a progress that kills what it claims to save. For part of humanity, the earth becomes a source of money, and for others—sand, drought, and desert. Water, essential for daily life, is increasingly commercialized: for some it is an ordinary product, used without measure, while for others it becomes an inaccessible luxury.

In a documentary made in 2005 by Austrian researchers, *We Feed the World*, the executive director of the multinational food and beverage corporation NESTLE, Peter Brabeck-Letmathe, stated that water is not a human right and therefore should be privatized and commercialized. He also spoke of the superiority of genetically modified organisms over organic ones and emphasized that the most important thing is to generate profit so that people may live better and be able to help one another. The ecological crisis has also gravely affected forests—the very ones that should provide the raw material for paper production. Research has not yet succeeded in finding effective methods to accelerate the regeneration of forest mass. Thus, many of the major consumer countries depend heavily on imports to meet their need for paper.

Many developing countries face serious difficulties in the process of literacy and cultural formation, and one of the causes is the lack of the necessary quantities of paper. Added to this is the attitude of many people who consider paper useless after a single use and discard it, although in reality most uses—such as reading—damage it very little or almost not at all. There even exist products whose price is lower than the packaging in which they are sold. Under these conditions, the recovery of paper and its reintegration into the economic cycle become absolutely necessary, and educating the population in this regard could significantly influence paper production and consumption.

However, it would be a serious omission not to mention that paper is also tied to one of the weaknesses of modern society: bureaucracy. The person who applies laws, regulations, or directives only according to their letter, without considering their actual meaning, becomes dependent on documents that, for him, become a substitute for authentic social life. From the perspective of such a “servant of paperwork,” people risk being perceived as mere files. Paper has, of course, useful purposes—identity documents and other necessary certificates—but the traps and risks that arise when a confused connection is established between a living being and various written representations should not be ignored.

It is easy to observe that the fundamental resources of the human being—the earth from which all things originate, the water that sustains existence, the trees that provide the wood needed for books and culture—are either excessively exploited, ignored in their real value, or transformed into mere commercial goods. At the current rhythm of society, detachment from paper will one day become inevitable. Paper production requires water and cellulose; cellulose is obtained from wood; and wood comes from forest exploitation. The future of these forests depends directly on how the global ecological crisis evolves. Unfortunately, no known methods exist for the rapid acceleration of forest regeneration.

We are witnessing increasingly intense aggression against the natural world, but also against the environment in which people live, interact, and develop. This violence does not affect only plants and animals but also human life, already negatively influenced by the increasingly irresponsible behavior of society (Not bored, n.d.).

From an economic perspective, we may say that the living organism formed by the entire biosphere and the environment that sustains it is endangered by a growing greed based on the idea of maximizing profit at any cost. The rule seems to be: gain for large global corporations and loss for all others, considered unimportant compared to the enormous interests of power structures that act without limits and without scruples.

In recent decades, economic development has focused primarily on the quantitative increase of goods, not on improving their quality, under the pretext of raising the standard of living for an ever-increasing number of people. As a result, the contemporary world has turned into a space dominated by consumption and competition, risking the self-wear of individuals through lack of responsibility and the unrestrained desire for pleasure, possessions, and energy. The fundamental problem lies in the false position that the human being adopts: he no longer places himself in the natural order. Instead of remaining aware of his connection with others, with humanity as a whole, and with God, the modern human being withdraws more and more into technology, into virtual space, into impersonality. Thus, he distances himself from his fellow humans and clings to matter, becoming absorbed by it to an extent previously unimaginable. Yet the current situation is not without solutions. There is hope that through the ever-increasing level of knowledge and technical progress, humanity may in time find authentic solutions to the problems raised by environmental ethics. This context led the philosopher Luc Ferry, a critic of secular-humanist currents in France, to identify three main directions of contemporary ecology, shaped by the global crisis. We observe that wherever ecology has taken on a coherent philosophical form, debates have been structured around three major distinct orientations, differing even in the way they understand the relationship between the human being and nature.

The first orientation begins from the idea that environmental protection is, fundamentally, a protection of the human being against his own excesses, especially when he behaves like a sorcerer's apprentice. Nature is not considered here as possessing intrinsic value, but only as an indispensable environment for the human being. By destroying the environment, the human being endangers his own existence and degrades his living conditions. Therefore, in an anthropocentric vision, nature is treated as peripheral rather than central, and is not recognized as an entity with rights or absolute value (Ferry, 1999, p. 28). The second orientation goes further and assigns moral significance to non-human beings. It adopts a utilitarian perspective according to which not only human interests must be respected, but global suffering must be reduced and the well-being of all creatures capable of pleasure or pain must be increased. This approach, highly influential in the Anglo-Saxon world, forms the foundation of animal rights movements, expanding moral responsibility beyond the human species and diminishing the importance of anthropocentrism (Ferry, 1999, p. 29). The third vision goes so far as to attribute a moral status to all of nature—including vegetation, minerals, and ecosystems—an idea that forms the basis of claims to rights for trees or for natural entities. Although this position may appear radical, it has become the central doctrine of numerous alternative movements in German and American contexts, raising the fundamental question of the limits of humanism and the need to reconfigure it (Ferry, 1999, p. 30).

In parallel, technological development brings people closer together and facilitates rapid access to various regions of the world. The planet "shrinks," communication becomes increasingly fast, and interdependence among nations becomes evident. At the same time, however, easy access to natural areas can lead to their degradation, reflecting the conflict between the ecological system and the industrial-economic system. How much of this conflict is inevitable and how much is generated by misguided decisions remains unclear (Marcus, 2011, p. 129).

If nature is perceived as a reality external to the human being, and culture as a derived activity, then the nature-culture relationship becomes one between exterior and interior, or

between objective and subjective. In such a view, the realm of meanings appears as a secondary construction compared to a deeper interpretation of the world (Marcus, 2011, p. 145). We are living in a time marked by a profound crisis, in which the truth is forgotten that the human being was called to be a co-worker of God, not the absolute owner of the world. The contemporary conception, which transforms the human being into the sole and indifferent administrator of creation, has generated the global ecological crisis. Even repeated warnings about ecological disasters have not succeeded in truly changing humanity's relationship with nature. In the primordial state, the human being lived in communion with creation; today, however, he views it almost exclusively through the lens of utility. Although called to exercise dominion over the world in the name of God, the human being bears a serious responsibility for its protection—a responsibility that extends to the life and health of the entire human community (Marcus, 2011, p. 131).

A Christian Perspective on Ecology

To speak meaningfully about a better world, it is necessary to understand clearly the present condition of human existence, with its desires, aspirations, and deficiencies. People today live in continuous motion, in a state of confusion that sometimes pushes them toward desperate actions meant only to ensure the continuation of life. Yet is mere survival the only horizon we are now able to imagine? Such a perspective would be far too limited. From the very beginning, nature was intended to serve as a support for the human being in his ascent toward God, the One who loves all that He has created.

Thus, the world becomes the window through which the human being may contemplate divine power and beauty. It represents a “language” by which God reveals Himself to humanity and offers support in the ascent toward the ultimate meaning, toward its Creator (Stăniloae, 2011, p. 234). Through creation, the human being receives knowledge of God to the extent necessary for salvation, according to his measure and limitations. The world is a gift given to human beings—a gift that deserves to be valued and understood in its true depth (Stăniloae, 1991, p. 167). As a work of divine love, the world has the role of leading the human being toward God, beyond itself, functioning as a means of dialogue in which the Creator calls humanity to communion (Stăniloae, 1991, p. 161). Only in this light can we understand the cosmos as a place of encounter with God, as a divine work destined for the human person. Creation expresses the thought of God become reality, and this truth reminds us that we are called to continual love for Him. Through the world, the human being concretely lives his existence and constructs the meaning of his life; therefore, creation becomes his partner in his relationship with God.

Today, however, the human being does not use resources according to their natural purpose. He treats nature as a manipulable object—exploited and dominated. Nature is no longer regarded as mystery but as raw material, and technology, through its interventions, alters, degrades, and sometimes destroys it. Most grievous is that, unconsciously, the human being gradually annihilates himself through the strictly utilitarian relationship he has established with the environment, as though he were engaged in a competition for power over it. Issues of pollution and all related problems arise from one fundamental issue: the survival of the human being.

Awareness of our bond with nature is gradually disappearing. If we analyze contemporary life, we observe that nearly everything is connected to technology: mobile phones, tablets, instant internet access, social networks—a mode of existence that unfolds in an ever more virtual space. In this context, nature becomes subordinated to the economic interests of powerful groups. And yet, the natural world remains a space of quality and meaning, a reality that transcends mere brute matter (Stoica, 2011, p. 51).

For this reason, the essential contribution of Orthodox theology to the ecological dialogue lies in reaffirming the profound connection between the human being and creation. Nature is neither meaningless nor devoid of God's presence; on the contrary, a better world will be born from within this creation itself, with divine help. Sound education can generate both a harmonious environment and an interior peace that modern humanity has lost, despite its ongoing thirst for justice, joy, and love. Forming a consciousness able to understand the reality of this age—marked by science and technology—and the permanent need to orient itself toward God and nature represents essential steps toward inner transformation.

Conclusions

The analysis of the condition of the contemporary world clearly shows that humanity is undergoing a profound crisis—both ecological and spiritual. The accelerated pace of consumption, the pursuit of material accumulation, and the utilitarian attitude toward nature have led to a visible degradation of the environment, as well as to the inner exhaustion of the human person. In this situation, Christian ecotheology proposes a necessary reorientation, placing at the center of reflection the relationship between the human being, creation, and God.

Creation is not a sum of resources to be exploited without limit, but the work of divine love through which God communicates His beauty to human beings and opens before them the path toward a higher meaning. It becomes a window into the omnipotence and wisdom of the Creator, a space in which the human person may recover the awareness that he is called to continual dialogue with God. At the same time, the world is the environment in which the human being concretely lives his existence and in which he may find direction and identity. To view nature merely as matter to be manipulated and dominated means to lose precisely this essential theological dimension.

Christian ecotheology reminds us that the human being is not the absolute owner of creation, but its steward—called to serve it with responsibility and discernment. Humanity's power over the world is not a despotic one, but a responsibility entrusted for the preservation of life, for the cultivation of harmony, and for the transmission of a healthy environment to future generations. Inasmuch as the human being protects nature, he is in fact protecting his own life, the health of communities, and the interior balance needed for spiritual growth.

The ecological crisis is, at its core, the crisis of a conscience that has become separated from God and has turned technique into a substitute for meaning. Life increasingly lived in the virtual sphere has diminished direct contact with the natural world and with the sacred present within it, causing the world to be perceived less as mystery and more as instrument. Ecotheology seeks to heal this rupture, reminding us that the world is not devoid of divine presence, and that the human being is called to look upon it not only with the eyes of interest, but with the eyes of gratitude.

A better world cannot be built solely through technical means or regulations—no matter how necessary these may be. It is born from within the human person: from his spiritual restoration, from the education of conscience, and from the renewal of a right relationship with God and with nature. Only insofar as the human being changes his way of relating to creation, viewing it as a gift rather than as an object of exploitation, can we hope for a true recovery of the ecosystem. Thus, Christian ecotheology is not merely an academic field, but a call to inner transformation, to responsibility, and to the rediscovery of the meaning of existence in a world in which God remains present and creation continues to be the place of encounter between human beings and His love.

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