

# THE SACREDNESS OF CREATION

*Archbishop Stylianos (Harkianakis)*

## INTRODUCTION

In introducing this major theme, one should say that it is not primarily the fact that the forthcoming Seventh General Assembly of the World Council of Churches, to be held in Canberra, will devote a substantial part of its programme to studies relating to the Creation - thus making it of special concern to all people of the Antipodes, who will find themselves in the front line in February, 1991 - that renders it of major importance. It is rather the tragic consequences of humanity's impact on the Creation throughout the last two centuries, and particularly in the so-called developed world, which makes all ecological questions, directly related to this theological issue, pressing priorities for the population of our world. At the same time, one should in advance observe that ecology as such cannot be a focus of discussion in the same way for the faithful as for the faithless. For it is not creation as such which dictates its sacredness, either as a whole or in its individual elements. If this were the case, creation would have been appraised more or less with the same criteria by all, and thus we would not today be facing this problem as a theological one, but rather as a purely technological one.

Yet the abuse which creation has suffered, at least in our outgoing twentieth century, was not primarily due to scientific or technological mistakes, but on the contrary is derived from deep ignorance or negligence of the place that this material and perishing world holds in the entire context of a programme which we Christians call Divine Economy. Having said this, we have brought together in their organic relation *ecology* and *economy*. Since both these key terms are of Greek origin, it is our first challenge to interpret their deepest meaning in all their possible theological parameters.

*Ecology*, for most people of our time, has become the central term for all environmental and, by extension, for all socio-political questions. Unfortunately only few - and perhaps not always the Christians, but those who have learned out of pain and deprivation to appreciate the value of the temporary things - are in a position to understand the present world in its religious context, involving, as it does, the life beyond. Utilitarian thinking has deprived man of the ability to see things of this world in their virginity, that is in their original uniqueness. This was a logical consequence of the fact that man was no longer himself virginal after the original fall, which was the most drastic expression of his self-love. This is precisely why one needs to transcend oneself as a "windowless monad" in order to rediscover the links which define one's place in the world-family and one's responsibility before man and God.

All these relations, and the moral obligations they dictate, would at least be intimated if one were to try to analyse the very term "ecology", which is the synthesis of two genuinely theological terms, namely "oikos" and "logos". As these two concepts have a very central place

with specific connotations throughout the texts of the entire Scriptural tradition of Judaism and Christianity, it becomes obvious that one is presented with a categorical warning that here one is dealing above all with theology in its deepest anthropological implications.

*Economy*, on the other hand, in the contemporary international vocabulary, exclusively denotes financial relations and issues, whereas the etymological analysis of the term leads one directly to "oikos" and "nomos", again two central notions of immense theological weight. A further observation, in the same direction, would clearly reveal that "ecology" and "economy", which entirely coincide in the first component of the two words, coincide no less on the basis of their second component, namely "logos" and "nomos". For the ending "-logy" undoubtedly indicates in the case of "ecology" much more than merely "talking about", as for example would be the case in "terminology". Ecology, as a movement and task of high urgency, signifies rather the anguish to save the basic balance between the individual parts and elements of creation which appear to be in jeopardy, and so ecology is actually the search for the hidden rules which guarantee the undisturbed function and development of creation as a complex and living organism. Bearing now in mind that *rule* and *norm* are the adequate translation of the Greek term "nomos", we realise that ecology and economy substantially belong together and therefore must be studied in their interrelation, which is possible only if one seriously takes into consideration the Scriptural doctrine of creation. As was natural, this doctrine, basically expressed in the first book of the Old Testament, became an item of utmost responsibility, and for this reason the Christian Church had to formulate carefully her doctrine on creation from the very first days of her existence, particularly in the creative dialogue with both fronts which had to be faced, namely Judaism, on the one hand, and the heathen world in general, on the other. This is why the first theme that all Christian writers and preachers always needed to discuss was the concept of creation, out of which immediately arise the concept of God and at the same time the responsibility of man. However, the discussion on this so elementary basis of "theology" still remains open to this day, because the task of the Church is not only to remain faithful to her dogmatic doctrine emerging directly from revelation, but also to respond to all possible questions posed by science according to the degree of its progress.

From all the above, it is clear that, in dealing with the question of the sacredness of creation, what is required is that we present here, at least in brief, the most substantial of the relevant aspects of the Church's doctrine of creation.

## **AN ORTHODOX APPROACH TO THE DOCTRINE OF CREATION**

### **I. General Presuppositions and Consequences**

As already stated above, the Christian Church's teaching on creation is irrevocably rooted in Genesis, and especially in its first two chap-

ters. And although the language employed by the Old Testament is obviously mythological and anthropomorphic, we must admit that it indicates a clear doctrine about creation which is basically interested not only in the grandeur of God, but equally in the sacredness of the entire created world. This, in other words, means that all materialistic theories about creation, which would disagree with the Scriptural and Patristic tradition on this crucial theme, do not merely do injustice to God Himself, but also desacralise the whole universe. Therefore, it becomes imperative for one to localise the most fundamental and characteristic principle that distinguishes the Judaeo-Christian view of creation from all the theories of pantheism, deism and dialectical materialism. There is no doubt that this unique principle is given in the dogmatic sentence that *God created all things visible and invisible out of nothing (ex nihilo)*<sup>1</sup>. It is, then, of paramount importance that one tries to draw carefully the most obvious consequences of the above dogmatic truth. The four basic consequences are the recognition of:

- (a) creation as an act of the absolute freedom of God;
- (b) creation as an act of the absolute love of God;
- (c) the absolute otherness of Creator and creation; and
- (d) the mortality and immortality of creation.

#### *(a) Creation as an Act of the Absolute Freedom of God*

Having in advance excluded every possible materialistic concept which would explain creation as being the cause of itself or the result of a blind evolution and accident, there remain in principle only three hypothetical possibilities of God creating the world: (i) out of pre-existing matter, (ii) out of His own essence, or (iii) out of nothing (*ex nihilo*).

The first two hypothetical possibilities would render God obedient to an external or internal necessity which is entirely incompatible with the absolute freedom of His will. For in the first case, the pre-existing matter would imply a factor not only rivalling God's pre-eternity, but also by its very existence provoking God to act, and dictating the framework of His action. The second case would mean that if the world is derived out of the very essence of God, it would have all qualities which characterise God Himself - that is *without beginning, without end, without change, omnipotent, all-good* and so on - which obviously contradicts the experience that man has with creation through all stages of its evolution. Therefore, it was of great importance that the early Church Fathers, such as Athanasius, always knew to distinguish the birth of the divine Logos out of the very essence of God (*homoousion*) from the creation of the world which had no real link with the essence of God.

Thus the only permissible concept is exactly what the Scriptures teach about creation deriving from non-being. For this concept, while keeping God absolutely independent from the limitations of contingency, at the same time explains the vulnerability of this world as we experience it in all forms of everything created.

#### *(b) Creation as an Act of the Absolute Love of God*

If St. John the Evangelist does not find another term to express,

more or less adequately, the very essence of God than *love* (cf. I John 4:8,16), this means that we too are obliged to keep this statement, in all its validity, as concerns the original relationship of God with creation. For love is indeed the only quality which explains the act of creation out of nothing. All other qualities of God - His omnipotence, omniscience etc. - would not be sufficient to explain the mysteries of all questions continually posed by creation. Qualities such as omniscience, omnipotence and others would at most render God an architect, as ancient Greek philosophy taught, but by no means the very *reason* of this world. In this context, one should say that the real omnipotence and omniscience of God lies actually in His absolute love, because only love can create *reasons even where no reasons* are to be found, while only love again can accept the *absurd* which is perhaps the most striking element in nature and history, at least in the so-called frontier situations. In other words, only love can continuously work miracles, the first of which is of course the creation out of nothing.

(c) *The Absolute Otherness of Creator and Creation*

The truth of the *ontological gap* between God and creation, dictated by the absolute otherness of God - a characteristic of which we have so emphatically been reminded in our century by Karl Barth - implies nearly all presuppositions of religious life, particularly *prayer*. For if God were of the same essence as creation, prayer, as an attempt to establish communion, would be pointless, since the common essence signifies absolute identity which is far more than communion.

Furthermore, the tendency of everything created to extend itself out of itself, in the various forms of "transfiguration", is a clear indication of this otherness towards which every created being is attracted out of deep ontological necessity. It is precisely this tendency which is expressed in all steps of material or biological evolution, as well as of intellectual or moral development of the human being. And it is in this very context that one refers to *ecstasis* in the mystical life and, more theologically, to *theosis* in Orthodox Spirituality.

(d) *The Mortality and Immortality of Creation*

Having described the relations between God and creation as understood in Orthodox doctrine, one should realise that all these three points culminate in a fourth point, namely the conviction that a creation which has been blessed by the absolute love of the Creator, cannot finally return again to nothing, despite the fact that it is derived from nothing. Such a creation is by grace elevated from ontological mortality to charismatic immortality. And it is precisely in this antinomy that one should see the most authentic motive in religion.

This, however, should not be misunderstood as suggesting that philosophy and science are excluded from such a view of creation. On the contrary, philosophy and science, and all other possible forms of human activity, are deeply related in and dictated by the createdness of the human being, which humanity shares with the rest of creation. This is why the greatest mystics in all religions could greet even in the

least speck of dust a brotherly creature for which they prayed without becoming idolaters. This is equally why the greatest scientists could explore the endless spaces of the universe or the slightest detail of matter with the same interest and dedication as if they were dealing with their own body.

Nevertheless, it must be said that the entire spectrum through which the sacredness of creation may be studied is not given in individual passages of Scripture, but rather in the central responsibility entrusted to man by God concerning cosmic order and the future of creation itself. This is why one should carefully study in all Biblical and Patristic texts this responsibility of man in its various dimensions. This task must have as its starting-point the basic Scriptural doctrine that man was created in God's image and likeness.

## **II. The Creation of Man "in the Image and Likeness" of God**

Usually, manuals of dogmatic theology describe the place of man within the entire universe in such a way that the main attention is focussed more on man's moral relation to God than on his organic link with the rest of creation. At first glance, this appears to be the natural consequence of the biblical doctrine that God created man in His image and likeness (cf. Gen. 1:26). And yet one should be sufficiently careful and sensitive to discover this "image and likeness" of God primarily in man's concrete responsibility for the whole created universe, rather than in a more or less abstract or idealistic correspondence to God's Holiness. For it is the whole of Scripture and Patristic literature that comments in one or another way on the said concrete responsibility towards the whole creation, so that we also should rightly respect this cosmic dimension in order to give a more balanced and convincing picture of man as "ordered to become God".<sup>2</sup> Very characteristic is this relation expressed in the Patristic terminology, according to which man is called "microcosm" and the universe "macro-anthropos".<sup>3</sup>

However, the classical passage from Scripture that refers to man's creation is Gen. 1:26, where man is said to be created in the image and likeness of God. It is noteworthy that the wording of this passage is indicative not only of the Biblical concept of God but also of the destiny of man: "let us create man in our image and likeness".

Theologians, as is well known, see in this formulation in the plural the first indications of the Old Testament of the Trinitarian essence. If one accepts this view, then the destiny and mission of man is already here clearly dictated as being in direct correspondence to the richness of the various blessings of the Trinitarian God bestowed through the entire divine economy.

However, one should note that such an emphasis upon man's "superiority" by comparison to the rest of creation does not in the least signify an alienation of the two. For the same Scriptural text describes God as creating man by taking soil from the ground (Gen. 2:19), which is a clear reference to the fact that man remains organically bound to the rest of the universe.<sup>4</sup>

Under these presuppositions which we have indicated, man appears to be a kind of *locum tenens* of God over the entire creation. Yet the primacy of man within the whole of creation, which results from the moral and spiritual abilities of being in God's "image and likeness", is clearly expressed in two other "moments" of full sacred symbolism that particularly deserve our attention. We refer, first, to the moment when God calls man to give a name to the creatures which He created *ex nihilo* (cf. Gen. 2:19-20); and, second, to the moment when God commands man to "increase" and "multiply" and "be lord" over the earth (Gen. 1:28). We have, therefore, *giving names* to creatures, on the one hand, and *subduing* the earth, on the other. What is the sacred symbolism behind this double "mission" and "responsibility" of man? There is no doubt that they both point to something immensely deeper than a mere, conventional-utilitarian, as we call it today, relationship between man and the world. Let us analyse this deeper quest.

First, the fact that man is called to give a name to every creature of God means that man is called to know and to recognise every creature in its particularity and uniqueness. It is this particularity, that consists of the *essence* and the *energies* of each creature - distinguishing it from, and at the same time relating it to, the other created beings of the environment - that the name should express, and not simply a conventional characterisation. It is this truth that the characteristic Latin saying *nomen est omen* expresses, and which was respected by the Greeks more than all other ancient people, precisely on account of their deep religiosity. This is why we see that names in Greek denote concisely the noblest, deepest and most permanent "qualities" of beings, rather than the superficial impressions of their passing presence in the visible horizon. Yet such name-giving presupposes *love*, which leads - as the surest power of knowledge - to an authentic *knowledge* of being, while it also presupposes authentic knowledge which increases love. We could then say that names in Greek are usually *conclusions*! Most striking in Modern Greek is even the expressive identity of the *person* and the *name*, as if they are synonyms. So instead of saying, for instance, that "three persons came", we say most characteristically that "three *named* (people) came"!

Now, if we are to recall the opinion of many of the Church Fathers that not only the original of the Old Testament, but even the translation of the Seventy (Septuagint), is not deprived of divine inspiration, then we should perhaps see even more mystical dimensions in the very selection of the verb "to call", which is used in the divine command to man in respect of name-giving. For it is apparent that since the word *ecclesia* derives precisely from the verb *ek-kalo*, which means "to call from around" and invite towards unity, then the command "call a name for them" is tantamount to "call them to the church".

Second, the "subduing" of the earth, especially when addressed by God to man, cannot mean external "conquest", nor mere "taming" of the elements of the world. This would be fuel for war between man and the rest of the beings, rather than an exhortation towards knowledge and love, which name-giving presupposes. This "subjection", therefore,

is to be interpreted in a more mystical and spiritual manner. Man is called to become "lord of the earth", not *ruler*, but only as God is Lord for man. Just as the lordship and the subjection of man and of the world by God does not aim at annihilation or destruction, but on the contrary to transfiguration and salvation, similarly the lordship of man over the world should be taken as concern and love to lead the world through man towards the destiny set by God. To use a more drastic example, perhaps we could say that just as man is called to become "head of the woman, even as Christ is the head of the Church" (Eph. 5:23), without meaning by this any subjection or tyranny, but rather an unceasing concern and loving providence, similarly also is man called to become "the head of the earth", so that ultimately we may have the realisation of what the celebrant characteristically prays for in Orthodox worship: "so that even through the elements of nature, through the angels, through men, through all that is visible and invisible, your all-holy Name may be glorified" (Prayer of the Greater Blessing of Waters).

From all that has been said above we conclude that the notion of "image and likeness" in man does not isolate or separate him from the rest of God's creation nor does it exhort him to become perfect apart from the world. On the contrary it places him in the centre of all creation as a vigilant servant and celebrant in order that the all-harmonious "cosmic liturgy" and the sanctification of all may be attained.

It is, then, clear that we have described the place of man in creation as it was provided by God in His loving providence. Yet this means that all this refers to man's nature and destiny *before the original sin*. Therefore, one should further discuss the results of that fatal fall - a crucial point, on which the major Christian Churches in East and West differ greatly, as is well known. Another issue which should consequently be considered is the extent to which fallen man is able to *cooperate with God (synergy)* - a postulate clearly dictated throughout all books of revelation, from the Old to the New Testament, not to mention the Patristic moral teaching which is in its entirety based upon this concept of "synergy". A third point which must be carefully examined is not only the degree to which man's fall has influenced the rest of creation (cf. Rom 8:22), but also the extent to which the fallen world as a whole may still be viewed as God's immediate "play-ground". This again leads directly to another characteristic theological topic, namely the obligation to distinguish in God between "essence" and "energies" - a distinction which for centuries has caused much dismay in the entire Western Christianity as a whole, because it was seen as the starting-point of a new idolatry, while the Orthodox Church has always seen it as the guarantee of the ultimate goal in man's destiny, which is deification.

In briefly answering all these questions, we should in the first line realise that they are deeply interrelated. This, in other words, means that if we are able to pinpoint the core of the entire complex, then we have gained the proper perspective for viewing and assessing the importance of each individual question.

The key notion to this end is undoubtedly the concept of person

hood (*prosopon*) as it is immediately derived from the Trinitarian understanding of God. The main features of *prosopon* are perhaps given in the most decisive way through *the distinction between essence and energy*, which is not an invention of Gregory Palamas in the fourteenth century but rather a basic conviction and teaching already of the Cappadocian Fathers. According to this distinction, it is not the essence which characterises the *prosopon* but rather its energies. Gregory Palamas is very categorical in stating that essence is derived from being and not *vice versa*.<sup>5</sup> And yet the essence remains the hidden and inaccessible depth which safeguards all the dynamism of the energies.

Only through this fundamental distinction may the *ontological identity* and, at the same time, the moral *freedom* of the person be saved. Thus the uncreated God and the created being, although separated by an ontological gap, may enter into communion only by means of the uncreated energies, irrespective of the fact that the immediate effect still remains in the order of the created. The possibility for such communion is the main reason why, despite the original sin, man is still capable of a responsible improvement in his relationship with God, while again the same communion allows him not only to remain in vital connection but also to collaborate responsibly with God in grace, which is the deepest sense of synergy.

The same mystery of the existing communion between created and uncreated - despite the two handicaps of the ontological gap and the original sin - is at stake also regarding the relationship between fallen man and the rest of creation. For the abundance of grace, which was poured out upon the created in the original act of creation out of nothing, remains the irrevocable strength and, in the final analysis, the only source of sacredness for the whole of creation.

## NOTES

- 1 Although in all manuals of dogmatic theology the direct reference to Scriptural texts related to this fundamental truth is limited to only two or three specific passages, such as II Macc. 7:28 and Rom. 4:17, where creation is mentioned as occurring literally "from non-being", there is no doubt that the concept of creation out of nothing tacitly accompanies all statements of ontological or moral character in both Testaments and in Patristic literature.
- 2 See Gregory Nazianzus, *Oration* 38,11.
- 3 Cf. Nilus of Ancyra, *Epistles* II, 119 and Maximus Confessor, *Mystagogia* 7.
- 4 Although much has been said and written about the fundamental question of man's creation, and particularly about man's relation to the rest of the animal world, this is perhaps the place to express certain simple thoughts, from an Orthodox theological perspective, which may be of assistance for a more balanced and fair discussion on the subject. Firstly, it must be borne in mind that even the Biblical language presents God as creating man not immediately out of nothing, but by taking soil from the earth (cf. Gen. 2:7). This surely indicates the essential link of man with the rest of the biological order. Having taken seriously this concrete Biblical presupposition, one is morally and theologically free to link man's derivation to any point of the material world, because the entire creation is equally sacred in order to become, in the hands of God, the raw material for the bodily vehicle of His image. Secondly, there is no reason why one should take as the source of man's biological derivation any other representatives of the mammal world than the primates, with which our structural similarities are so striking that only unscholarly prejudice could overlook them. Thirdly,

theology and science would really contradict each other in the question of man's derivation only if science would insist that man came from a non-human ancestor automatically, namely through a blind natural necessity and not through God's special intervention. This means of course that, although at a certain moment, God could have taken the body from an ancestral form and transformed it into a man, not any ancestor - then, or in any future stage of creation - could again produce a man.

- 5 Cf. *Triads* III, ii, 12.