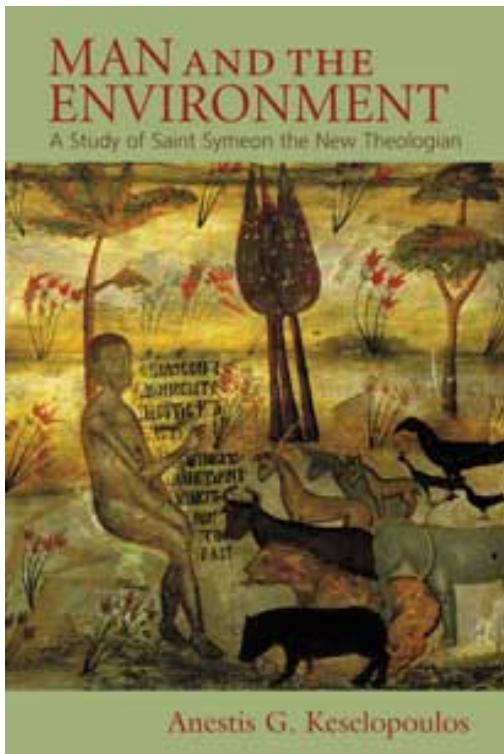


Anestis G. Keselopoulos, *Man and the Environment: A Study of St. Symeon the New Theologian*. Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001, 192 pp.



*By Spencer Estabrooks*

The Director of the Department of Ethics and Sociology at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki has provided in *Man and the Environment* an exploration of the unique basis, which the Orthodox theological tradition offers for reflection on the

environmental and ecological concerns which confront humanity on a global scale.

Though the work was published originally in Greek in 1979, the 2001 English translation is very timely. The book's subtitle describes it as a study of the thought of the great 10<sup>th</sup> century Orthodox saint and mystic, St. Symeon the New Theologian, many of whose writings are now available in English. However St. Symeon's thought provides a basis for Keselopoulos to open up the full depth and breadth of the cosmological dimensions of Orthodox theology. The author also

amplifies his presentation with references to the thought of a good number of Church Fathers, saints and thinkers throughout Orthodox tradition to the present day. He connects the relatively brief meditations and revelations in the writings of St. Symeon, and develops their meaning in order to present a coherent and wide-ranging Orthodox theological grounding for reflection and action in relation to the current ecological crisis.

Some of the challenging and stimulating themes of this work include the following: the importance of the ascetic life for understanding the meaning and purpose of creation and of each creature; the sanctification, transformation or transfiguration of created things as the fulfillment of creation; the Eucharistic use of the world as the opposite pole of the misuse of creation; iconography and architecture as reflections of Orthodox understanding and experience of the created world; the essential need for contemplative knowledge of creation and its purposes within the will of God, which knowledge cannot be attained when the creation and humanity are treated as autonomous and approached only through the information provided by reason and the senses, and while we are governed by sinful passions.

An overarching theme running through all sections of this book is the teaching that human life and salvation cannot be separated from the life and salvation of the whole cosmos. Keselopoulos says:

In reality. . . the Church lays upon each human being the immense honor and also responsibility of saving the whole world, whose flesh is our flesh and whose life is our life. "Salvation" for the Church means that man lives safe and whole in a universe which is safe and whole. In other words, it is the liberation of life from corruption and death, the transformation of survival into fullness of life, and the

participation of the creature in the mode of existence of the uncreated (pp. 160-161).

Interestingly, the language in the first part of this quotation regarding the earth being our flesh, is the same as that used by North American aboriginal peoples when describing their experience and their understanding of the role of the indigenous peoples as "earth-keepers."

A few choices of words in translation of this work may be unfortunate. "Exploitation" employed as an alternative to "use" or "benefit from" is unfortunate since it is used now in English primarily in a negative sense. The same is true of the occasional use of "domination." Also, "rights" is now associated more with demands and claims than it is with what is owed to persons or creatures as a result of their natures and relationships to God. "Mastery" also may raise negative connotations for many, though it is made use of in a positive way.

In emphasizing the importance of maintaining the unity of matter and spirit Keselopoulos makes the assertion that

. . . modern philosophy and science generally follow this approach, rejecting conflicts and contrasts between matter and spirit and trying to see and interpret the world and man on the basis of unity and interdependence (p. 1).

My reading of modern philosophy and the roots of modern science lead me to an opposite conclusion. In general it seems to me that Orthodox writers do not acknowledge the way in which morality, religion, and philosophical views of the world are deeply integrated in the modern Western (and now world-wide) drive for technological domination, exploitation and manipulation of creation and human nature.

Clearly, however, the great emphasis which the author places on the teaching regarding the inner *logoi* or meanings of all aspects of creation, which can be known only through communion with the living God in Christ, means that apart from a very profound repentance, asceticism, and living faith, efforts to "solve" ecological and environmental problems will be ineffective. Since we apply only our own utilitarian understandings and purposes in our encounter with "nature," assuming that there are no divine purposes present in an autonomous and meaningless universe, we act upon creation as "gods" determining all things according to our desires and goals. The ancient Greek Socratic philosophical view that each being in the cosmos has its *telos* (goal or fruition), and the aboriginal view that each species of creatures constitutes a distinct "people" sharing the earth with us and living according to its own "way," seem to me to be closer to the teaching of the Orthodox tradition as presented in *Man and the Environment* than the theory and attitude which has motivated and shaped modern technology and science since the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

This book contains the best exploration and presentation which I have encountered, of the breadth and depth of the theological resources of Orthodox Tradition in relation to the current ecological crisis.

Furthermore, this work is the clearest and fullest presentation of the cosmic vision of life and its destiny, with the most food for thought and growth on this topic, which I have found to this date. It is an excellent resource for studies in Orthodox Christianity and the environment, and a rich resource for meditation and transformation among those who would like to grow in understanding and incorporating in their lives and church communities, the cosmic vision of creation and salvation.

A relatively brief, but useful bibliography of related books and articles is included at the end of the book.

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