

Autonomy Reconsidered

Creation, God, and Relationships

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When I was first reading about ecological issues, I came across an excerpt from *The Sand County Almanac*. In that piece, conservationist Aldo Leopold presented a number of statements that I found quite thought provoking. Specifically, this pioneer of ecological ethics argued convincingly for the proposition that humans need to embrace a “land ethic.” This ethic is engaged in an active enlargement of the moral community “to include soils, waters, plants, and animals or collectively: the land.”¹ The moral task that Leopold sets out involves changing relationships on multiple levels so that humankind’s part in the ecological play shifts from being a “conqueror of the land-community to a plain member and citizen of it. [This shift] implies respect for...fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such.”²

These few words were stunning to me because they show the connection between faulty relationships, and the present ecological crisis. The remedy that Leopold suggests comes down to a very simple enlargement of the moral community. After reading the work of Walter Wink, I came to label such thought integrative ecological ethics.

¹ Aldo Leopold, “The Land Ethic,” in *Ethics in Practice: An Anthology*, in Hugh LaFollette ed. (Oxford: Bracknell, 1997), p. 635.

² *Ibid.* p. 635.

Specifically, I took my inspiration in this regard from Winks' description of an integral worldview, which sees the universe and all its parts as essentially related.³ Integral ethics simultaneously recognizes such essential interrelatedness; theological ethics is easily grafted on to this image of crisis in relationship, allowing us to cite maladaptive relationships as causes of the present day earth crisis. Through this lens, the ecological crisis could be sourced in a spiritual crisis.

The premise that the ecological crisis has spiritual roots is also invoked by Orthodox Theologian, Anestis Keselopoulos, in his recent work, *Man and The Environment: A Study of St Symeon the New Theologian*.⁴ Keselopoulos identifies many of the issues that integrated ecological ethicists would also pose as problems. Significantly, he cites the problem of a dualism that separates matter from spirit, extolling the latter over the former. Yet, at the same time, Keselopoulos fails to fully see the ramifications of what an integrated ecological ethics would require if it were taken as a standard for Christian moral thought.⁵ For instance, a few pages after identifying the spiritual nature of the ecological crisis, Keselopoulos writes of communion with God as "being crowned and consummated in the interpersonal relationships of rational beings."⁶ A few lines later he writes, "it is only Orthodox cosmology, far removed as it is from the eccentricities of magic or idolatry or autonomous nature worship that is able through the authenticity of its tradition to offer a positive valuation of the material being of the world."⁷

³ Walter Wink, *The Power That Be: A Theology for a New Millennium* (New York: Galilee doubleday, 1998), pp. 19-22.

⁴ Anestis G. Keselopoulos, *Man and the Environment: A Study of St. Symeon the New Theologian*, (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminar Press, 2001), p. ix.

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 1.

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 3.

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 3.

After reading Aldo Leopold, these phrases seem inauspicious from the point of view of integrated ecological ethics. The latter quotation represents a dualist dichotomy, extolling one point of view by demeaning another. Additionally, it is an exclusivist argument when it claims that “only” Orthodox cosmology can effect such an authentic and positive valuation of the material world. In using the crown imagery, the first statement is also hierarchical, and as ecofeminist theologians⁸ might argue, by referring to “consummation” Keselopoulos further uses sexual imagery in a fashion that sets up a power imbalance between rational beings, and the rest of creation.

Even the title of the monograph, *Man and the Environment*, would be of concern to integrated ecological ethicists, as it uses a gender exclusive term in combination with an anthropocentric idiom.⁹ Granted, this monograph is a translation and the language may reflect that fact. In short, integrated ecological ethics, constructed along the theological lines that I am suggesting here, would challenge the notion that a patriarchal lens, and in particular, androcentric rational thought could ever form the proper nexus for an authentic or holistic consideration of creation, God and relationships. Additionally, for a critical Anglophone reader, in and of itself the androcentric language Keselopoulos employs is very distracting in terms of his normative goal: helping us rediscover a voice from the Orthodox tradition that may now provide nourishment for a spiritual journey that is necessary for humans to undertake lest we effect a disastrous ecological collapse.

⁸ Ecofeminist comes at these issues from diverse starting points, but generally it is fair to say that they recognize a concept of what Heather Eaton labels “interlocking patterns of repression,” so that, for instance, within ecofeminist thought patriarchy is imaged as a problem not only for women but also for the planet. See Heather Eaton, *Introducing Ecofeminist Theologies*, (London: T & T Clark, 2005), p. 114.

⁹ The term ecology implies relationship within the context of the life community while environment denotes that which surrounds the human, and therefore carries an anthropocentric connotation. It follows that an improved title for Keselopoulos’ work from an integrated point of view would be *Humanity Within the Ecological World*.

In Keselopoulos' monograph there is; however, a great number of resources that can prove valuable in terms of what I call "essential recovery." I coined this term by following Father Thomas Berry's lead in discerning the great moral potential that is brought into play when the past is imaged as a resource in regards to forming an integrated ecological ethic. In short, the term invokes the idea that there would be certain ways of being in relationship to creation that may be absolutely necessary for us to live out more fully in the current context if humans are to remain part of a flourishing community of diverse life forms on this planet.

A possibility for such essential recovery emerges when we reflect on the fact that all human societies, at various time in their cultural and historical origins, necessarily lived in a deep relationship with the natural world. In order to avert the most destructive aspects of the present ecological crisis, we need recover something of that integral functioning. Recognition of integral relationships in this world, thus, becomes a type of recovery that is not a fundamentalist appropriation of the past, but is rather a shift, buttressed by a new story that grows on the wealth of both the historical example and our present day cosmological insight. According to Berry's analysis, such a shift provides the basis to usher in a necessary ecological age.¹⁰

Affecting this shift becomes humanity's moral duty to a vital future – a path to avoid a situation where anthropogenic causes result in an irreversible spiral of destruction ruinous to the continuation of diverse life of this planet. Transferring this insight to a theological context, while remaining cognisant of the anthropocentric dualist, hierarchical and exclusive tendencies in Keselopoulos' work, we can

¹⁰ See Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1998).

nonetheless note several pertinent and timely insights that might aid us in recovering a sense of our essential relationship with God, which can simultaneously help heal the relationship between humanity and the natural world.

Given that Saint Symeon¹¹ is known for his visions of light and exalted spiritual states,¹² he is a particularly interesting choice for an act of essential recovery in regards to a grounded theology. Yet, Keselopoulos argues that Symeon's visions can never be separated from the ascetic struggle.¹³ This is a contextually relevant point, for an ascetic response would seem to be highly relevant today, in the face of rising human populations and consumption,¹⁴ as it is an important means towards fostering an insight that will encourage humans to walk lightly on the earth. Visions of correct relationship amongst (all of) humans, God and creation will have to include an ascetic element lest one species (ironically, one with self-reflective consciousness) destroy the niches of all other species. Particularly interesting in regards to human selfishness or what older Roman Catholic thought might label "gluttony,"¹⁵ is that the "oppressive and tyrannical control which man feels from material good is due to the effort he makes, whether consciously or unconsciously, to make them autonomous from the creator."¹⁶

¹¹ Saint Symeon (also spelled Simeon) the New Theologian (949-1022) is the third of the three saints of the Orthodox Church to be given the title 'Theologian' (the two other saints are St John the Apostle, and St Gregory Nazianzen).

¹² Keselopoulos, p. 7.

¹³ Ibid. p. 8.

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 123.

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 94.

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 9.

This is a key point, one that Keselopoulos repeats throughout the book, but perhaps it should be phrased differently. In that they generally work out of integral worldview, which accords moral worth to the all constituent members of the larger life community, ecotheological ethicists might want to assert that both humans and elements of the natural world both possess a certain amount of autonomy due to the nature of their relationship with God.

From a theological point of view, just like the human rights discourse, in its Christian origins, argues that all people deserves a certain amount of respect due to the fact that God was present in them, for those who take the Gospel message seriously, a panentheistic view of creation would mean that creation should be respected in its own integral functioning. Note here an important potential, which is latent in this panentheistic perspective, in terms of intra-human ethics, a theological awareness of the special presence of God within people gave a foundational impetus for the creation of human rights regimes. Now, avoiding what in the Judeo-Christian tradition has been termed a pantheistic error (that is, seeing God as everything), panentheism by virtue of seeing God in everything has the potential to provide the foundation for a set of new ecological rights that protect the dignity and integral functioning of the entire natural world. Further, by analogy, such panentheism would mean that just as God is seen a present in a sacramental human marriage, God would be seen as having a special presence within a healthy ecosystem.

In this light, it becomes a corruption of integral spirituality to not think of the world as having certain autonomy. Granted, from a Christian theological view this autonomy is necessarily sourced in God's roles as sustainer and creator of the universe.¹⁷ Yet, to call this image

¹⁷ Keselopoulos also attributes these qualities (amongst others) to God, see p. 26.

“primitive,” as Keselopoulos does,¹⁸ can detract from the insight, which most aboriginal religions hold that the natural world is a significant window onto the divine. Indeed, as Keselopoulos seems to realise when he speaks of God as being present but invisible,¹⁹ a turn to a completely immaterial type of spirituality allows for the removal of context from spiritual life in this world. As Keselopoulos implies,²⁰ a key challenge in this regard is to find a means to participate authentically in an earthly existence than is not artificially separated from our spiritual vitality.

Perhaps the most important insight raised in *Man and the Environment* could be found if we approach Keselopoulos volume with a teleological lens. In simple terms, this idea revolves around the insight that we share with the rest of the natural world a common origin due to us all being created by God.²¹ It follows that there also exists a nexus of solidarity between the humans and the natural world, found in the common destination, in cosmological terms, that awaits all creation according to Christian belief.

In Orthodox theology this common destination is expressed most poignantly in the doctrine of transfiguration,²² which is clearly imaged as an event for both the human and other elements of the natural world.²³ Through such means humans and the natural world are shown to share not only a common origin, but they also are firmly tied

¹⁸ Keselopoulos, p. 13.

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 29, p. 33.

²⁰ Ibid. p. 39.

²¹ Ibid. p. 42.

²² The event of transfiguration, Theophany on Mount Tabor told by Matthew (17:1-8), Mark (9:2-9), and Luke (9:28-36) is very important for hesychastic monasticism

²³ Keselopoulos, p. 5.

together in terms of fate. As Symeon's writings indicate,²⁴ this is an image of deep interconnectedness, so that humanity, in particular human physiology, and the cosmos become symbolic of each other.²⁵ That sense of sharing in the material, which links us with the rest of creation, is key because therein the body becomes more than just "a soul container" as we await liberation in the after life. In terms of theological anthropology, as Saint Irenaeus of Lyon²⁶ argues, it is body and soul that come together to make a human.²⁷ Therefore, in a pertinent sense, concepts of either disembodied souls or soulless bodies become meaningless in regards to understanding the human situation.

From a Christian point of view, seeing spirituality in this manner reaffirms the material as ripe with spiritual significance. In the Orthodox tradition, viewing matter in this light allows for a pertinent interaction between hagiography and geography – through such framing the study of the saints and the study of the earth can be joined in a manner that more fully recognizes their symbiotic relationship. This aspect of the Christian tradition allows the relics of saints, and the places where they lived and walked to become objects, and locations with significance for the faith.²⁸

In reviewing the Orthodox tradition, Keselopoulos argues that Church fathers were countering the idea of the Platonists and the neo-Platonists that matter was eternal, despite their later affirmation that

²⁴ A poet, St Symeon was a defender of the mystical hesychastic monastic tradition.

²⁵ Keselopoulos, p. 42.

²⁶ Irenaeus of Lyon (c. 130-202) was bishop of Lugdunum in Gaul (now Lyons, France), whose writings were formative in the early development of Christian theology.

²⁷ Keselopoulos, p.44.

²⁸ *Ibid.* p. 4-5.

the matter in the Body of Christ is eternal.²⁹ Rather, he continues, God who is the one eternal thing created matter, out of nothing (*ex nihilo*). It follows, for Keselopoulos, that the fathers were affirming an important biblical principle when engaging in debate with Platonist and neo-Platonists on the nature of the material world.³⁰

On this latter point, I am in agreement with Keselopoulos. However, the idea that the nexus of the debate with the Platonists was ever solely over the eternal nature of matter seems to miss the key defence afforded by people like Irenaeus against the dualism inherent in Gnostically-styled thought.³¹ Such Platonic dualism, in all its forms, tends to locate all manner of perfection as existing completely beyond this world – the material is flawed, while the immaterial is equated with that which is both perfect and located somewhere else. Western Christianity, in so much as it has sometimes emphasized the eternal nature of a disembodied soul, has not been that different.

However, in terms of theological anthropology, many early Christian thinkers clearly emphasized the resurrection of the body against such a disembodied discourse that was supported by their Gnostic opponents. In basic terms, these thinkers thus extolled the principle that “matter matters.” It followed that if our relationship with creation was damaged, if we abused the very “stuff” around us that was created and sustained by God, we were simultaneously damaging our relationship with the divine, the natural world, and other people. In a significant way the theology of Saint Symeon allows for the possibility of

²⁹ Ibid. p.162.

³⁰ Ibid. p. 43.

³¹ See Irenaeus of Lyon, *Contre les Hérésies: Édition Critique D' après les Versions Arménienne et Latine* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1965).

the good existing in this world in a dynamic manner³² that Platonist thought could never accommodate. For example, as Symeon argues first, the needs of the body and the needs of the soul both require our attention, and second, neither set of needs can be belittled as part of our spiritual journey.³³ This insight in place, the path towards an integrated creation care ethic that does not belittle the natural world becomes much clearer than when it is obscured by platonic dualism.

This affirmation of the material due to its spiritual significance also means that destroying or subverting the course of nature in its own movement towards perfection becomes particularly problematic because we would be interfering with the natural world movement towards the divine.³⁴ A duty of creation care emerges in this movement towards God. Humans cannot wantonly destroy the niche of every other species when they are accorded such spiritual worth. Indeed, from a theological point of view it follows that we cannot take life needlessly or interfere with the rest of creation's own movement towards God. Dominion need not equate with exploitation if we can keep this insight in mind.

For Keselopoulos, following St Symeon, the human does have a role to play in this movement, not only in terms of creation care but also as a microcosm and mediator who helps craft creation as the *logos*.³⁵ Whether or not we image our role in the earth story in this manner, such theological reflection raises a spectre of questioning the ultimate right of humans to subvert their potential for creation care into creation domination. Human induced ecological collapse and the current biodiversity crisis become morally untenable under these conditions.

³² Keselopoulos, p. 54.

³³ Ibid. p. 48.

³⁴ Ibid. p. 62.

³⁵ Ibid. p. 67.

Indeed, for Symeon the corruption of our relationship with natural world would be marked by its anthropocentric enslavement.³⁶ This is where we have arrived with today's ecological crisis. This is the fall recast in ultimate terms; redemption is necessary before we destroy the only home our species has known in this universe.

Despite such instances of thoughts and insights that are present in Keselopoulos' monograph, the way they are presented can only take us so far. This is made plain by Keselopoulos' condemnation of any movement on the part of humanity to accord the natural world autonomy, because it risks making nature divine.³⁷ Even prior to this point, it must be recognized that the autonomous worth of the natural world can never be fully realized as long as human are considered the crown of creation.³⁸

In a pertinent sense then, the best that Keselopoulos' volume, taken as a corpus, can hope to do is to move us towards a respect for the natural world centred on a hierarchical image of responsibility.³⁹ In simpler terms, Keselopoulos, at least in translation, can only take us as far as stewardship. If all humans were good stewards that would undoubtedly help accord the natural world a certain amount of moral worth. Nonetheless, as Keselopoulos argues with consistency, this would not represent a form of autonomous moral worth.

³⁶ Ibid. p. 70.

³⁷ Ibid. p. 81.

³⁸ Ibid. p. 5.

³⁹ Ibid. p. 160.

I wonder; however, when St Symeon experienced awe in relation to workings of creation⁴⁰ if he was not taking the first steps towards integrating a type of autonomy for nature into his own thought. Indeed, recognizing creation as the result of an interaction amongst the persons of the Trinity⁴¹ shows how creation is immediately and continuously laden with relationship, and relationship, almost by definition, can only take place on a substantive level amongst at least semi-autonomous actors. Without such differentiation between moral actors, the result could only ever be wholly self-referent or even narcissistic. Most Christians would hold as a tenant of their faith that God was not acting narcissistically, but rather, lovingly when creating life. In this light, relating the creative acts of the Trinity to further differentiation, and not narcissism, becomes crucial for Christian belief in a loving God, lest we erroneously assert that in creative acts God was merely engaged reproducing God-self. Indeed, viewing God as narcissistic in this regard could only lead to a most un-vital pantheism for those who respect the divine force in the universe.

Spurred on by Symeon's description of God as akin to a landowner appropriately apportioning his land,⁴² the nearest analogy that I can think of in regards to Keselopoulos' viewpoint on "environmental"⁴³ relationships connects with the feudal system in the West. In ideal terms, the feudal system represented an intricate system of relationships and responsibilities. However, in application, due its hierarchical structure, this system often represented a form of repression for those who found themselves on the lower end of the great chain of being. One way to speak of this repression is to say that

⁴⁰ Ibid. p. 19, p. 23..

⁴¹ Ibid. p. 21.

⁴² Ibid. p. 16.

⁴³ See footnote nine for a brief discussion concerning the connotations invoked by the term "environmental."

it was only possible because peasants, serfs or even foxes were not accorded moral worth in a manner that recognized their authentic autonomy. Hence, history witnessed a system of power dynamics that proved unstable and unsustainable.

Returning more specifically to our subject matter, the systems that replaced feudalism have generated an unprecedented capacity for the human to exploit the natural world. However, I strongly believe that this most costly of errors, the drive for exploitation, was due to a failure to exercise authentic autonomy that is respectful of integral relationships, and not simply due to the presence of some measure of autonomy itself. I just cannot see how autonomy should necessarily deny the possibility of divine presence or even divine purpose, as Keselopoulos seems to assume. Autonomy, in order to be sustainable, must be exercised in a substantive relationship. Far from severing the relationship between nature, humans, and the divine,⁴⁴ bringing God into a measure for authentic moral autonomy would solve the theological problem identified here by reminding people that, in any one moment, there is something more than the material and something more than the human, while simultaneously helping us remain cognisant that the human and the material are linked, because they are sustained and created by God.

Part of the challenge today is not to reconstruct feudalism to incarnate such moral insight but to find and found other political relationships that work towards a reformation of human ways of being that are liberatory, as far as possible, for every thing on this earth. In the end, Keselopoulos demonstrates that St Symeon can help in this regard. Yet, at the same time, the defects of his book in this area point to the enormity of the task and the challenge of forming systemic

⁴⁴ Keselopoulos, p.83.

responses to the present moral and ecological crisis from within any Christian tradition. That this disconnect occurs on the level of framework and vision⁴⁵ in *Man and The Environment* points to the spiritual difficulty inherent in any effort to integrate authentic respect for the natural world with our everyday lives. Nonetheless, because the future of the planet may depend on such an integral shift, fostering this ecologically emancipatory moral movement can be cast as the challenge of our times. To effectively meet this challenge, we need nothing less than reorganization of relationships previewed in the Divine Liturgy. On this point I can agree wholeheartedly with Keselopoulos.⁴⁶

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⁴⁵ Ibid. p.102.

⁴⁶ Ibid. p.171.