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### THE ECOLOGICAL CRISIS – A HUGE CHALLENGE

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#### *Abstract*

The survival of the planet Earth in its entire reality is the major problem we face today. Both scientists and all Christians are concerned about the evolution of the ecological crisis. That is why, both at the level of the whole of human society and at the level of the Church, the evolution of life, the slippage of the present ecosystem has become a main point on the agenda. The joint efforts of the competent institutions of the world's states, Christian Churches, environmental organizations have succeeded, at some points, in the adjustment of pollution and the implementation of policies to protect the environment. In this context, we can say that in some points the human desire and the survival of the earth are similar. In any case, no human desires or desires can be realized as long as the earth no longer exists.

On this paper I will try to emphasis some aspects of ecological crisis and how they affect us. Also, I will try to underline the Christian points of view, as the solutions proposed for that.

**Keywords:** ecology; crisis; anthropocentrism; biodiversity; environment; ecosystem;

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

Our world is connected with us, and we are living on it. For that, we can make the difference. This world is today how it is, because of our involvement or our indifference. The ecological crisis, well connected with the economic crisis, represents a challenge and a dilemma for the entire world, which determines not only reflection, but also action. Everyone is called to contribute for the sake of our world.

If we want to live in a normal and wonderful world, we must preserve it. Ignoring all environmental changes from nature, we became indifferent to our lives, to the future of entire world. The preservation of our planet became important not only for the secular society and organizations, but also to “the world religions”, which “*have been instrumental in formulating views of nature and in creating perspectives on the role of the human in nature*” (Mary Evelyn Tucker, John A. Grim, 1999, 11).

The solutions for better world depends by the perspective of every society, of every human understanding. Despite of differences, everyone has agreed to the fact that: we must be preoccupied by our world; without our involvement our world will not be the same tomorrow as it is today. Unfortunately, today “*no one religious tradition or philosophical perspective has the ideal solution to the environmental crisis*” (Mary Evelyn Tucker, John A. Grim, 1999, 11).



## **2. PROBLEM STATEMENT**

Industrial civilization has polluted the environment with toxic chemicals and radioactive elements. This fact has led to a degradation of our global ecosystem. “*The secularism, humanism, and materialism of industrial culture demystified and undetermined earlier environmental ethics, aggravating the destructive impact of industrial technology*” (J. Baird Callicott, 1999, 33).

Orthodox theology has been concerned with the human-nature dialogue, understanding that only through a partnership man and nature can reach the perfect edge in the kingdom of God. Not the exhaustion of natural resources, not the use of unnatural means to solve it, are the goals to which man is directed, but the collaboration and harmony. Among the most remarkable theologians of today who have dealt with the ecology relationship with the Church, about Eco-theology, we mention: PF. Bartholomew, Ecumenical Patriarch, Ioannis Zizioulas, Dumitru Stăniloae, Dumitru Popescu, Gheorghe Petraru, etc.

## **3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

Dealing with the warming of atmosphere, thinning of the ozone layer, the rapid disappearance of some plant and animal species, the destruction of the tropical rainforest that surrounds the earth, and many other events, and using the biblical teachings, the Cristian Church taught that the human being is only a steward, not an owner of this world. We received this world, and we have the duty to protect, and gave to the next generations as we received. The destruction of it means a destruction of our way of living. For that, what we can do? Which is the contribution to preservation of our planet? What says the Christian Church about that?

## **4. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

This study will try to identify the ecological crisis as a huge challenge of our world. The aim of our approach is to understand the role and contribution of Christians on this world. Christians, as every inhabitant of this world, must make difference, learning from biblical and patristic teachings and applying nowadays. Until our society and our life will not change, we cannot keep this world the same. For that, the Orthodox Church have taught and practice a responsible life in the world, called Eco-theology.

## **5. RESEARCH METHODS**

On this paper I will use the theoretical methods of research, trying to identify the some practical solutions. The Christian Church must have an important role on the world, preserving it for the future generations. Awareness of decline of our world is the first step. After that, everyone is called to act for the preservation of the environment. Believing that is our duty, as Christians and inhabitants, to be involved on the protection of our world, as creation of God.

## **6. FINDINGS**

### **6.1. Domination or Stewardship. A Christian point of view**

Despite the human perception that all goods acquired or inherited in this world are ours or are our property, man is only a controller of the goods received from the Creator. Often the gains in technique, the welfare, the worries, the tribulations, or even the joys of this life make us believe that we are eternal, that here is Heaven and Hell<sup>1</sup>, that the rich and well-ranked social will also be in the afterlife. Nothing more untrue! Very often, right here on earth, these myths have been broken, they have been turned into shadows and dreams. People holding key positions, fortunes, were honoured by the whole society. It has been proved, however, that this is but a shadow and a dream; the expectations of others and theirs have been mistaken. There was, however, a category of rich people who enjoyed themselves, like the rich man who gave birth to the land, all right here on earth. But at the terrible judgment, how will he respond to the righteous and immortal Judge?

The Orthodox Church has always maintained that man is not the owner of the world, but only an administrator of material goods, which he has received and ought to be aware of. The world is just a sensitive scale, which is meant to climb man to greater and more comprehensive meanings. The

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<sup>1</sup> There are some who believe that those who are wealthy and have a high social standing are right in Heaven, and the others are in Hell, in the hell of poverty, of indigence, etc. For “*the satisfied never believes in the hungered*”, as one of our Romanian proverbs says.

contemporary man, stolen by the mirage of this world, believes that the world is the ultimate destination, it is the target to which it is heading. He does not see the world as the space of his encounter with God, his dialogue with the Creator (Rom. 1: 19-20).

Because of the scientific conquests of our time, the contemporary man is tempted by all the professional goals, by the horizon of major events, by his own space of life. Thus, the civilized world becomes a wall in the way of others' suffering and solidarity with them. Without mercy, no matter how bright, the world remains captive and disfigured. A world in which the human subject has not gone beyond the material things for its fellow men, but has remained with them.

Wealth, if not wisely used, is nothing but shade and dream. The one who finds its support in material goods forgets their role in human life, the fact that God is the one who measures with the same measure as we measure, that we have all received it as a blessing, not as a curse, for the benefit of one another in God. Even nature has an important role to play in the mission entrusted to man on this earth. It is not a means for man to alienate himself from God and to escape his selfishness, but a useful partner on the path to God.

The possession of property and fortune is often accompanied by a severe spiritual poverty<sup>2</sup>. The rich man only thinks of his wealth, becoming his slave<sup>3</sup>. Instead of enjoying these goods, not squandering them with pleasure and fun, enriching them with a lot of wisdom to acquire a more precious good - the Kingdom of God, the rich see things selfishly, like the rich man from the parable of the Saviour Christ who gave birth to the land. The transcendent material wealth, earthly, that is, wealth and money, "*must not be an end in itself, but a means of seeking and cultivating the inalienable, heavenly spiritual wealth that is gained by love for God and for people through charity and other good deeds*" (Daniel, 2009).

The man is only the administrator of the goods entrusted to him. The world is just a sensitive scale, which is meant to climb man to greater and more comprehensive meanings. The contemporary man, stolen by the mirage of this world, believes that the world is the ultimate destination, it is the target to which it is heading. He does not see the world as the space of his encounter with God, his dialogue with the Creator (Rom. 1: 19-20). Referring to the fact that we are only administrators here on earth, St. John Chrysostom says: "*So, because they are not ours, but the Master, we had to spend with our brethren, because for this reason the rich in the Gospel was blamed, as well as those who do not feed the Lord, as some who did not*" (St. John Chrysostom, 2005, 102).

The Christian Church has emphasized the responsibility of the man for all creation. The man, along with creation, should move towards perfection, not destruction. "*The word "ecology" contains the prefix*

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<sup>2</sup> The researches that have as objects of study wealth and happiness are full of contradictions. For decades, studies showed that more money did not bring a greater degree of spiritual fulfilment. A study conducted in 2010 claims that super-rich people are still pleased with their lives, but they also struggle with daily frustrations. A new study co-funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation shows that ultra-wealthy people are not really happy, but are worried about worries and fears caused by too much money. According to an article published in *The Atlantic*, survey respondents were generally unsatisfied with how money has led to greater anxiety both on a professional, sentimental or family level. <http://www.ziare.com/life-style/fericire/banii-aduc-fericirea-super-bogatii-nu-prea-cred-asta-1081925>

<sup>3</sup> Eloquent in this regard is *The 8-minute Legend and the wealth of the soul*.

The legend says that a poor woman with a baby in her arms, passing by a cave, heard a mysterious voice that told her: - "Enter and take everything you want, but do not forget what is more important. Remember that when you exit the gate it will be closed forever. So take advantage of this opportunity, but do not forget what is more important!"

The woman entered the cave and found many riches. Fascinated by gold and jewels, he placed his baby on a rock and began to gather everything he could. The mysterious voice spoke again: "You only have 8 minutes!"

When the eight minutes passed, the woman, loaded with gold and precious stones, ran out of the cave and the gate closed. Then he remembered having forgotten the child inside, and the gate had closed forever. Wealth has lasted a little, and despair forever.

*“eco,” which derives from the Greek word oikos, signifying “home” or “dwelling.” How unfortunate, then, and indeed how selfish it is that we have reduced its meaning and restricted its application. This world is indeed our home. Yet it is also the home of everyone, just as it is the home of every animal creature and of every form of life created by God. It is a sign of arrogance to presume that we human beings alone inhabit this world. Moreover, it is a sign of arrogance to imagine that only the present generation enjoys its resources”* (<https://www.patriarchate.org/bartholomew-quotes>).

## **6.2. The ecological crisis on the XX century**

It is incomprehensible why only starting with the XX century ecological crisis and care for the survival of the earth have become a landmark on the work agenda of society. In 1968, American historian Lynn White, writing about the historical roots of the ecological problem, categorically attributes it to the Western intellectual tradition and her predominantly rational views of man, and imputes theology and the Church with great responsibility for this evolution (Ioannis Zizioulas, 1999, 34).

Pollution, exhaustive consumption, globalization, permanent desire for welfare regardless of costs, man’s lack of connection with God and the world, focusing on egocentrism, and focusing only upon our own human creation have made this world not a true God’s garden, in which man would have enjoyed the fruits he received, but an instrument to achieve his own goals. *“The experience of the two world wars and their catastrophic consequences came to appease the optimism of the 18th and 19th century Enlightenment prophets who believed that by cultivating reason and spreading knowledge the twentieth century would become a paradise for the human nation”* (Ioannis Zizioulas, 1999, 31).

Global warming, thinning of the ozone layer, the rapid disappearance of some plant and animal species, the destruction of the tropical rainforest that surrounds the earth, and many other events have caused a growing concern among society. Different views have emerged about the reaction that people should have to these challenges: the first method, also called *“anthropocentrism”* - utilitarianism, for example - is applied in the Western society and did not yield the expected results. The second method is called *“biocentrism”* (centred on life). It is built on animal welfare ethics and attempts to extend the relationship of human ethics beyond sentient animals to all living things. The third method, also called *“ecocentrism”*, is done on the lines of Aldo Leopold’s ethics (J. Baird Callicott, 1999, 31). Following Darwin, Leopold believed that ethics had its origins, as understood, in social organization, and that we humans have the duty and obligation to keep it in the community we belong to as self-standing members. Thus, he argues that *“the ethical realm changes the role of homo sapiens from a conqueror of society to a simple member or citizen”* (Aldo Leopold, 1949).

In a pertinent theological analysis of human-world relations, the presence of God must also be indispensable. The man, the image of God, cannot forever ignore his vocation and his eternal purpose - the reformation to God. *“In the context of the current technical and informational society, man preserving and giving life to his religious beliefs inherited in the living, confessional, ecclesial tradition is and remains the same spiritual, rational and free being that is defined and understood in a logical and ontological relationship with God”* (Gheorghe Petraru, 2002, 11).

In this spiritual journey, as in the Old Testament “the stairway of Jacob”, man is connected with the world. Christianity has always had a positive attitude towards the ecological issue. The whole Christian doctrine speaks about sustaining and promoting our values. Place, space, culture, spirituality, our national being are landmarks that link us to this world, our living on this earth.

In order to preserve this world from destruction, observes a Western author, *“there is a need for a renewal of the whole Western religious-spiritual tradition in relation to the full functioning of the Earth’s bio-systems. We must move from the spirituality of the alienation of the natural world to the spirituality of the connection with the natural world, from the spirituality of the simple justice for men to the spirituality of justice for all the other components of the great earthly community”* (Thomas Berry, 2000, 128).

In one of his articles, Thomas Berry presents the three phases of the loss of man's connection with the natural world (Thomas Berry, 2000, 128-131). The first phase begins with the encounter of primary Christian spirituality with Greek humanism in the basic form of anthropocentrism that the world has promoted so long through the centuries that it has lost human sense as an integral component of the great community of existence.

The second phase of the removal of humanity from the natural world came when the plague (the Black Death) broke over Europe between 1347-1349. This period was devastating for western civilization. One third of Europe's population died during these years. It seems that the survivors have not cried their dead; they themselves felt they would soon die. The plague was widespread in Florence where, in the summer of 1348, less than 45,000 people survived out of the 90,000 who lived there in the beginning of the year. In Sienna, at the same time, out of 40,000 people only 15,000 survived.

The problem was that people did not know how to explain what had happened to them. They had no knowledge of germs. They could only conclude that the world had become weaker. God has punished the world. There was a great need for repentance, for withdrawing from the world, and for a quest for redemption.

The greatest consequences of plague can be seen in the spirituality of the detachment of the world as it was predicted by Thomas de Kempis in the mid-fifteenth century. The Book *The Imitation of Christ* became classical for Western Christian spirituality during the five centuries from that time to the mid-twentieth century (Thomas Kempis, 2001).

The third moment in the loss of connection with the natural world happened at the end of the nineteenth century, when man abandoned his role in renewing the organic farming economy in favour of the extractive industrial economy. This was the decisive event that moved the entire scientific and technological power of the modern world into a program of merciless destruction of the planet's organic functioning. At this point, the planet has lost its wonder and majesty, grace and beauty, its life-giving qualities. The planet has become an object of use. "*Modernism has started from the premise that nature is dependent on man, and that man can do all he can with nature, but has forgotten that man is also dependent on nature and if he does not take measures to limit the ever more worrying proportions of pollution will undermine his own life and existence*" (Dumitru Popescu, 2001, 13).

Through these three phases of the planet's ablation, the profoundly spiritual aspect of the earth was almost completely denied. The expression of Toma d'Aquino that "*the order of the universe is the last and the noblest perfection in things*" has lost its meaning. Any awareness of the spiritual communication made by the natural world with man has become extremely weak. From a Christian perspective, the value of creatures ultimately derives not from utility, market price, beauty or charm. Indeed, their value derives from their Creator (Calvin B. Dewitt, 2000, 300). To recognize in the world the creation of God is a gift of the Holy Spirit, just as the text of creation and subsequent scriptural confirmations are the fruit of divine inspiration that gives the sacred author the vision of all existence as a dependence on God and in the light of God (Gheorghe Petraru, 2002, 109).

The social and environmental problems that we face at the beginning of the 21st century call on us to identify some causes that often go beyond our temporal and spatial boundaries. Only through "*Christian spirituality*", through a desired and sustained commitment to the whole world, we can make our approach viable in our own lives (Stephen R. L. Clark, 1998, 123).

## 7. CONCLUSION

Along with industrial development, human society has been increasingly struggling with an ecological crisis. The rapid consumption of natural resources, the exhaustion of resources due to the waste of contemporary society: water, food, warmth, convenience and lack of interest for the good of the planet that shelters us have created the premises of a departure from everything that surrounds us. The basis of

this attitude was the desire of man to have welfare, regardless of the price to be paid. This aspect is also linked to man's complete perception of nature, transforming it from a partner into a tool that can be exploited at its discretion.

Today's ecological crisis is deeply rooted in excessive economic development, unprejudiced exploitation of nature, even in sacrificing it for good and for human well-being. It had planetary dimensions, its consequences being noticeable from now on. On this point, the Ecumenical Council of Churches at the General Assembly of Canberra (1991) stated that "*the human species, which entered the stage of history and creation only eighty thousand years ago, was able to destroy only two centuries since the beginning of the industrial age, which nature has built over four and a half years. This crisis, it says, has its roots deep in the unshakable man's lusts of exploiting natural resources for power and enrichment. The economy and the industrial era was irresponsible to treat nature from the desire for profit. Everything is the result of an autonomous concept of the world that has eliminated any presence of God in the cosmos seen*" (C.O.E., 1991, 2).

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