

**Ecological Imperative:  
A response to the ecological challenge in Eastern Europe**  
Siarhei Yushkevich

The problem of the ecological crisis is not a fresh theme for conversation. But still, it's topical and I would say vital for our world today. Therefore, many different conceptions, theories and propositions appear which try to give a response to the ecological challenge (and these hypotheses are always different). I will try to make a short review of the situation that has emerged in Russia and Belarus in last few years in the ecological discourse of the government and of the Russian Orthodox Church.

Russian philosophers and scientists develop the noosphere concept of society-nature interaction, which was offered by Russian scientist Vladimir Ivanovich Vernadsky (1863-1945).<sup>i</sup> These concepts, in turn, generate such notions as the 'ecological imperative' and 'ecological moral'. The ecological imperative is a term, supposed to be understood in juridical sense, as an injunction or requirement to follow the rules of environmental protection. The first to use this term and try to clarify it was N. N. Moiseev. He defines the ecological imperative as a complex set of restrictions on human activity; non-fulfilment of which can soon turn out to disastrous consequences for mankind.<sup>ii</sup> For Moiseev, the ecological imperative is a fundamental part of a new human consciousness. The Russian philosopher uses this term in a singular form to underline neither the juridical nor the natural-science meaning of it, but to bring this term to the wider contest of philosophical research. It is so, that there could be several ecological imperatives: every kind of science can state its own ecological imperative. But it is obvious that to solve ecological problems it is essentially important to use a complexity of scientific methods. The ecological imperative is essentially combined with the idea of integrative ideology (in a sense of vision) and the ethical result of understanding of the ecological crisis.

At the same time, Moiseev developed the idea of the moral imperative. This means that behind the ecological imperative reveals a universal conception of a new vision, of a new moral, accepted and adopted by a human consciousness. Today the reorientation of human moral, with a new relation towards nature and to each other is necessary. Certainly, the realization of the ecological imperative requires a new moral and new ecological ethic.

The intention of the ecological imperative is described more or less clearly in a special document - The National Strategy of Sustainable Social and Economical Development of Republic of Belarus.<sup>iii</sup> Ecological imperative is described in a few points, which are at the same time, an essential requirement of its realization. They are:

- A human should be in the spotlight, because s/he has the right for a healthy and fruitful life in harmony with nature;
- The right for development should be directed in order to preserve the environment for present and future generations;
- The environment should become an integral feature of the social and economic process and shouldn't be considered in isolation from it;

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- It is necessary to put into practice the ecologisation of industry, in order to eliminate the negative anthropogenic impacts on the environment;
- Social and economic development must improve the quality of people's life in acceptable limits of the economy's and ecosystem's capacity;
- Ecologisation of the consciousness and the vision of a human and the ecologisation of upbringing and education.

Shortly, this is the essence of the ecological imperative, considered by Belorussian scientists.

### **The response of the Russian Orthodox Church**

Following the *Bases of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church*<sup>iv</sup> the unity and wholeness of the created world is the main concept in the ecological position of the Russian Orthodox Church. Orthodox Christianity considers environment as not a separate and closed system: flora and fauna and the human world are interrelated. Human beings are not a landlord, but a housekeeper and priest. Correspondingly, nature is a house and temple; not a storage of resources. Here the concept of theocentricism plays important role. Life itself, in all its variety, is sacred and given by God, therefore disregarding the environment is a challenge not just to God's creatures, but to God as well.

The next point of the Orthodox Church is that ecological problems are essentially anthropological problems. Therefore responses for many problems, caused by the environmental crisis, can be found more in the human heart and soul than in the sphere of economics, biology, technology and politics. The spiritual state of humans has a great impact on the environment, both in cases of external action on the environment and when there are no such actions. So, another problem appears simultaneously – spiritual crisis. People lost awareness of life as God's gift; sometimes the sense of life and existence is lost. Spiritual degradation of a person allowed the degradation of the environment, because people couldn't change or transform themselves and thus couldn't transform or change the environment. Overcoming the ecological crisis without overcoming of spiritual crisis is impossible: "...a human being can turn the whole world into heaven, when he will be bearing heaven in himself".<sup>v</sup>

Kirill, Metropolitan of Smolensk and Kaliningrad, (today Kirill, Patriarch of Moscow and all Rus') emphasized that the tragedy of the contemporary human lay in a hierarchy of values by a principle of use and benefit, what leads humans to indifference to truth. It is a process of substitution of ends by means. At the same time, Christianity should also understand that justice, peace and integrity of creation are means but not the ultimate goal. The ultimate goal is an Eternal Life in God and deification (theosis) of world. Of course, besides the ultimate goals there are other temporary goals, which must be submitted to the ultimate goal. Great hopes are set also on theocentric ethics, which helps to avoid ethical relativism. Theocentric ethics states integrity, interdependency and importance of all creation, and considers nature and humans not as autonomous and self-sufficient, but indicates that they find their sense and destination in the Creator.<sup>vi</sup>

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Orthodox theologians in turn, underline a liturgical (sacramental) aspect in ecological questions. They consider the Eucharist to be the most brilliant moment of the matter of consecration.<sup>vii</sup> The Eucharist is the highest way humans treats the universe. The matter is brought forward in the form of bread and wine to God, because all creation belongs to God. Christians just return it back to God. This calls them to take care about God's creation and preserve its integrity. The Holy Communion represents God meeting us in the very centre of our relationships with creation and enters in the heart of our biological life.<sup>viii</sup>

## **Christian ethics**

Orthodox theology opens a new vision of asceticism. Christianity calls man to turn to unconstrained self-restriction. Unconstrained self-restriction reminds humans of the Saints and hermits of the ancient Church, didn't negate life, but on the contrary, through asceticism tried to affirm life. The Greek Fathers named the complex of people's wrong actions by the word 'pride'. Pride creates all our sins, not only towards God and our neighbours, but also towards the environment. Through ecological asceticism we can get rid of pride today. It is possible to destroy our pride only through free self-restriction, through constant changing of our behaviour with the help of liberation from ourselves.<sup>ix</sup> Orthodox theology considers the possibility to overcome contemporary crises on the ground of such ethics. Such ethics expected from a human being are the refusal from dominion over nature, self-restriction of consumption, careful usage of science and engineering, and veneration for life.

## **Cooperation between the State and Church**

Both the government and the Church have the same aim in ecological discourse – generating moral norms, and the so called ecological imperative. But at the same time on this ethical ground appear paradoxical problems. Most ecological thinkers and philosophers in Russia and Belarus are consecutive evolutionists, but they came to the conclusion that the moral aspect of Christianity (as the most spread religion of their region) plays an important role: "Initial principles of Christianity in combination with primary passion<sup>x</sup> of western culture and with a support of the collective intelligence could play a decisive role in overcoming the crises of the coming century".<sup>xi</sup> The ethical principles propagated by Christ 2000 years ago are still real for contemporary society and could become a fundament of the contemporary ecological imperative.

Thus, it is necessary to make several conclusions:

1. The ecological policy of the government (both in Russia and in Belarus) is rather clear: it is necessary to form a so called ecological imperative in society. To this effect it is necessary to form a new moral imperative, which means an acceptance of a new value system. But a huge problem appears when scientists try to propose a way in which one or another moral system is accepted by society. Norms and rules of behaviour, which are accepted to name the moral, take place spontaneously and the mechanisms of such processes are hard to understand. Here it must get specific, when they take place in a transition in the spiritual sphere of a human.

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2. It seems Orthodox Christian theology can propose a way to understand the accepting of moral values, at least in Christian society: through liturgical, patristic and moral theology. Orthodox Christians realize that to overcome ecological problems a global moral consensus on the fundament of universal values is needed. But the voice of the Russian Orthodox Church is too small, to change something in the ecological discourse in Russia or Belarus. The problem is not only in the political specificity of these regions, in relations between government and church; there is a lack of Orthodox theologians who try to give a wise and constructive response to the ecological challenge. Nobody tries to propose a Christian Orthodox eco-theology.
3. The most important point is that there is no fruitful dialogue between science and religion. It is possible to say, that both natural science and theology are self-contained, and even demonstrate indifference to each other in Russia and Belarus.

So, in my mind, it is obvious that it is necessary for the Russian Orthodox Church and Orthodox theology to get abreast ecological discourse. On the other hand, ecological discourse in Russia and Belarus, without appeal to Orthodox theology, loses a chance to see images of God in the relationships between humans and the environment.

In this respect western European countries show a genuine interest in the theology of Orthodox Christianity.<sup>xii</sup> As far back as 1985, a German Calvinist theologian Jürgen Moltmann notes in his magisterial work *God in Creation* that East-Orthodox theology is worth investigation because the Orthodox teaching about creation has preserved ideas, which were rejected and forgotten in the West and that in the oldest traditions of Christian theology humans, can often find a strategy for the future.<sup>xiii</sup> Western theologians are interested in another way proposed by East-Orthodox theologians: to give more attention to the Church Father's theology and their perception of nature.<sup>xiv</sup>

In correlation to environmental problems some aspects of Orthodox theology are significant for western theology and culture: Orthodox spirituality, soteriology and sacramentology. The Orthodox spirituality as a practical search for unity between the environment, humans and God, based on theocentric ethics, points to other alternatives for the industrial, western mentality. Through the Orthodox view humans are called to realize that together with their basic requirements for survival – breathable air, drinkable water, non-toxic food – there are true needs that are no less real; for beauty, for space, for contact with the living world around us.<sup>xv</sup>

The Orthodox soteriology focuses on a holistic perspective of reality of humans and nature. On the one hand the salvation of environment is an indispensable fundament for human's salvation, and on the other – a unique position for humans: to bring all creation to salvation.<sup>xvi</sup>

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The Orthodox sacramentology offers a specific way of understanding nature: the knowledge of nature in order not to dominate it, but to make it a part of the sacramental-Eucharistic community. The obstacle here is how to turn this view into practice in the conditions of western consciousness.<sup>xvii</sup> To find common ecological orientations it is obvious there is a necessity for a dialogue between East-Orthodox and western churches. Finally western theology is interested in the apophatic principle<sup>xviii</sup> of Orthodox theology and the correlation between Orthodoxy and the theology of process<sup>xix</sup> as a starting point of detection of practical understanding of nature.<sup>xx</sup>

Curiously enough, sometimes barriers of the Orthodox tradition have to confess that they have a scanty knowledge of their own faith and don't even expect the kind of prospects Orthodox theology can open on the way to the ecological imperative.

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<sup>i</sup> According to the thought of V.I. Vernadsky and Teilhard de Chardin, noosphere, (greek nous "mind" + sphaira "sphere") is a concept which denotes the "sphere of human thought". In the original theory of Vernadsky, the noosphere is the third in a succession of phases of development of the Earth, after the geosphere (inanimate matter) and the biosphere (biological life). Just as the emergence of life fundamentally transformed the geosphere, the emergence of human cognition fundamentally transforms the biosphere. Contemporary philosophers use this concept to understand the way in which Russians approach the concept of sustainable development. N. N. Moiseev also uses Vernadsky's concept and calls it the "age of noosphere" – a period of human being when the collective mind and collective-will will be able to provide joint society-nature development. He calls this joint development by the principle of co-evolution.

<sup>ii</sup> N.N. Moiseev, *Voskhodzeniye k razumu*, (1993), p.120.

<sup>iii</sup> "Natsionalnaya strategiya ustoychivogo sotsialno-ekonomicheskogo razvitiya Respubliki Belarus' na period do 2020 g.," *Natsionalnaya kommissiya po ustoychivomu razvitiyu Resp. Belarus*, Mn, 200 p.

<sup>iv</sup> "Tserkov' i problemy ekologii," *Osnovy sotsial'noy kontseptsii Russkoy Pravoslavnoy Tserkvi*, M., (2001), p.106.

<sup>v</sup> "Tserkov' i problemy ekologii," *Osnovy sotsial'noy kontseptsii Russkoy Pravoslavnoy Tserkvi*, M., (2001), p. 108

<sup>vi</sup> Mitropolit Smolenskiy i Kaliningradskiy Kirill (Gundyayev), "K ekologii dukha" *Zhurnal Moskovskoi Patriarkhii*, No.6, (1991), p. 52.

<sup>vii</sup> J. Chryssavgis, "The earth as sacrament: insights from Orthodox Christian theology and spirituality" *The Oxford handbook of religion and ecology*, (Oxford Univ. Press: New York, 2006), p. 92.

<sup>viii</sup> Milton Efthimiou, "Pravoslaviye i ekologicheskiy krizis",

[http://krotov.info/libr\\_min/ae/aecoteol/eco\\_130.html](http://krotov.info/libr_min/ae/aecoteol/eco_130.html).

<sup>ix</sup> Ibid 8.

<sup>x</sup> Passionarity is the concept of L. Gumilev, which he introduced to describe his ideas on the genesis and evolution of ethnoses. The concept of passionarity may be explained as the level of vital energy and power characteristic of any given ethnic group.

<sup>xi</sup> N.N. Moiseev, "Mir XXI veka i khristianskaya traditsiya" *Ekologiya i zhizn*, No.1, M., (2003), p.40-45.

<sup>xiii</sup> It is worth to say that a great impact into witness of Orthodoxy to the West was made by Metr. Paulos Gregorios of the Orthodox Syrian Church of the East. Among his works are: Paulos Gregorios, *The human presence: an Orthodox view of nature*, (WCC: Geneva, 1978), p. 104.; Paulos Gregorios, *The Cosmic Man: the Divine presence*, (NewDelhi, 1980), p. 273.

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<sup>xiii</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *Gott in der Schöpfung. Ökologische Schöpfungslehre*, (Chr.Keiser: München, 1985), p.13. Moltmann follows here his so called “ecumenical method” in his theology of nature, according to which it is necessary to be opened to different traditions of understanding of creation including Jewish, Catholic, East-Orthodox theologies and secular world (achievements of sciences).

<sup>xiv</sup> An excellent example is a book of Sigurd Bergmann, *Geist der Natur Befreit: die trinitarische Kosmologie Gregors von Nazianz im Horizont einer ökologischen Theologie der Befreiung*, (Matthias-Grünwald-Verl: Mainz, 1995), p. 522 .

<sup>xv</sup> S. Degen-Ballmer, *Gott-Mensch-Welt: eine Untersuchung über mögliche holistische Denkmodelle in der Prozesstheologie und der ostkirchlich-orthodoxen Theologie als Beitrag für ein ethikrelevantes Natur-und Schöpfungsverständnis*, (Lang: Frankfurt am Main, 2001), p. 245.

<sup>xvi</sup> Elizabeth Theokritoff, *The Orthodox Church and the Environmental Movement*, <http://www.goarch.org/ourfaith/ourfaith8024>.

<sup>xvii</sup> S. Degen-Ballmer, *Gott-Mensch-Welt*, p. 270.

<sup>xviii</sup> Apophatic principle (apophatic theology) – or negative theology – is a theology that attempts to describe God by negation, to speak of God only in absolutely certain terms and to avoid what may not be said.

<sup>xix</sup> Theology of process – is a school of thought influenced by the metaphysical process philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead. Theological and philosophical aspects Whitehead’s philosophy have been expanded and developed by Charles Hartshorne, John B. Cobb, Jr., and David Ray Griffin. One of the major concepts of process theology is that the universe is characterized by process and change carried out by the agents of free will. Self-determination characterizes everything in the universe, not just human beings. God cannot totally control any series of events or any individual, but God influences the creaturely exercise of this universal free will by offering possibilities. (See: John B. Cobb, David R. Griffin, *Prozess-Theologie: eine einführende Darstellung*, (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1979), p. 193.

<sup>xx</sup> S. Degen-Ballmer, *Gott-Mensch-Welt*, p. 279, 299.

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