



# Orthodox Ecotheology: An Evaluation of Orthodox Academic and Seminary Engagement and Examples for Discussion<sup>1</sup>

by Dr. Christina A. Nellist

## Abstract

*This article begins with a review of the historical Orthodox engagement with Eco and Animal theology before turning the focus to the level of contemporary engagement with both subjects by Orthodox academic institutions and seminaries. It has been 37 years since the then Ecumenical Patriarch, Dimitrios I invited the Christian world to act on behalf of God's creation. To assist the necessary spiritual changes required, he dedicated the 1st of September as the day of prayers for the protection of the environment. His successor, Patriarch Bartholomew I has continued this work, so much so, that he is known as the "Green Patriarch." In light of the numerous teachings, symposia, seminars, summits, etc., that have been available to Orthodox academic institutions and seminaries, one might reasonably conclude that these institutions would reflect these teachings in their courses. This paper examines whether or not this is the case. Also explored is the contemporary Orthodox public theological engagement with the missing dimension within ecotheology, that of animal theology. Two new modules that are taught by senior Orthodox theologians are proffered, which could be of assistance to academic and seminary leaders when formulating new course material on these important subject areas.*

**Keywords:** Eastern Orthodox; Christianity; Ecotheology; Animal Theology; Seminary; Academic Education.

<sup>1</sup> This article is based upon the author's Keynote speech given at the VID University, in Stavanger, Norway in 2025.



## Introduction

As a theologian, educator and lifelong conservationist who taught her students about deforestation in Brazil and its consequences for both plants, animals, and the planet, as far back as the late 1970s, the author has always argued that it is incumbent upon those with a faith-based worldview to engage with the subject now before us, both individually and institutionally, locally and nationally, just as they are engaged in providing alms, justice for the poor, in the provision of schools, health clinics and feeding programs, or in the prescription of diets.

When the author began to study Eastern Orthodox theology, this necessitated an examination of the contemporary Eastern Orthodox academic literature at that time. Despite the reasonable debate on the need to care for and protect the environment, there was little engagement by leaders of the Eastern Orthodox Church or its scholars on the suffering of the individual animals within that environment. Whilst there was the occasional positive comment that denounced cruelty to non-human animals, there was ambiguity regarding our treatment and relationships with them, as the language used seemed to identify non-human animals as a resource, simply to be used for the benefit of humans, with no validity or agency of their own. Due to the almost total lack of engagement, it was also clear that there was likely to be considerable ignorance on many aspects of animal suffering and equally, that it was time for this ignorance to be addressed.

Later, when the author decided to embark on a PhD in Orthodox theology, it was felt that a visit to one of our leading theologians, Met. Kallistos of Diokleia, would be valuable. When he was told that the author wanted to develop a theology for creation, he said the following: “Please concentrate on the animals...because everyone these days is writing on the environment, but nobody is writing about the animals.” What the author and many others did not realize at that time, was that he was one of the first contemporary Christian theologians to write on kindness and compassion to animals, and the wider creation. It is worth noting that Metropolitan Kallistos’s engagement with this topic spanned nearly sixty years, and predates the renowned Western leader in this field, Prof. Rev. Andrew Linzey<sup>2</sup> by some thirteen years, beginning with his seminal 1963 article “Saints and Beasts: The Undistorted Image,”<sup>3</sup> continuing many

2 The Revd. Professor Andrew Linzey, PhD, DD, Hon. DD, has been a member of the Faculty of Theology in the University of Oxford for 28 years. He previously held the world’s first academic post in Theology and Animal Welfare at Mansfield College, Oxford, and at Blackfriars Hall, Oxford. See [Director - Oxford Centre for Animal Ethics](#)

3 Kallistos Ware, “Saints and Beasts: The Undistorted Image,” *The Franciscan*, Vol. V, Autumn, no. 4 (1963): 143-152. (Herein-after Saints/Beasts.)



years later, through interviews and lectures, and culminating in his 2021 article “An Integrated Theology,” in *Climate Crisis and Creation Care: Historical Perspectives, Ecological Integrity and Justice*.<sup>4</sup>

In the 1963 work, he posits a traditional Orthodox perspective when identifying common qualities of the saints’ relationships with animals and the wider creation – love, reverence and respect, and lastly, authority. He states:

Love of God and love of God’s creatures cannot be separated. Men, animals, inanimate objects - we are all one creation, one family: we are all, as Saint Francis expressed it, brothers and sisters...because he recognised in them the same origin as in himself.<sup>5</sup>

The author asks the reader to keep this traditional Orthodox teaching in mind throughout the rest of this article.

## Engagement – or rather, lack thereof

It has been 37 years since the then Ecumenical Patriarch, Dimitrios I invited the Christian world to dedicate the 1st of September as the day of prayers for the protection of the environment. In his first Patriarchal Encyclical on the environment in 1989, His All-Holiness informed us of his great anxiety caused by the merciless trampling and destruction of the natural environment, which he viewed as leading humanity to “the edge of apocalyptic self-destruction.”<sup>6</sup> In this message, he gives various examples of this destruction, such as the extinction of many species of animals and plants. As a result of the situation at that time, he also stated that “the church of Christ cannot remain unmoved.” This concern prompted his establishment of the Day for the Environment, but also his call for “all the faithful” to respect and act to protect the natural environment. He also expanded his plea when urging “all those entrusted with the responsibility of governing the nations, to act without delay in taking all necessary measures for the protection and preservation of the natural creation.” In essence, he called us all to care for all things and to effect change through action. In so doing, he reminds us of the traditional Orthodox teaching that all things are connected and interconnected, and

4 Kallistos Ware, “An Integrated Theology,” in *Climate Crisis and Creation Care: Historical Perspectives, Ecological Integrity and Justice*, ed. C. Nellist (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2021).

5 Ware, *Saints and Beasts*, 147.

6 Dimitrios I, Ecumenical Patriarch, “Message on Environmental Protection Day” 1989. See <http://www.ec-patr.org>.



of a teaching from Christ that will guide us on this point. In Luke 14:5, written in Greek but often mistranslated in the West, Christ asks his audience: “Which of you if your son or ox falls into a pit/well would not act immediately to pull them out on a sabbath day?” Here Christ deliberately places his human creature together with his non-human creature. There is an equivalence of care here. Both types of creatures are suffering, both are in danger, both need our help, and both need us to act, and to, in His words, act immediately. As this is a direct teaching from Christ, it ought not to be ignored.

Dimitrios’s successor is His All-Holiness Bartholomew I. He has carried this work forward throughout his tenure as Ecumenical Patriarch, so much so in fact, that he has become known as the “Green Patriarch”. In his Patriarchal Encyclical on 1st September 1994, he makes an important distinction that is frequently overlooked by those who fail to carefully examine his words. He comments on the destruction of the environment and delicate ecological balance by “uncontrolled destruction of animals and plant life *or* by the reckless exploitation of natural resources.” You will note that I emphasize the little word “or” because in this Encyclical (and elsewhere) it has huge significance. There is an important distinction made, and this is that animals are not a “resource.” Animals are not metals, chemicals, air, or water, they are living, thinking beings who are loved and cared for by God. This difference is all too frequently, and may I say conveniently, ignored by many clergy and academics across the world. Our words have consequences and describing animals as a “resource” had, and still has, devastating consequences for all animal species. Importantly, he also restates the traditional Orthodox teaching that “all things” – the entire creation, will be saved, and that cruelty, abuse and exploitation of the natural world, *and* indifference to its suffering, are sins requiring repentance *and* changes in our hearts, minds and behaviours.<sup>7</sup>

A forensic question arises here: Does our theology and ecotheology focus on the world because it is a resource for human survival, or does it reflect the Image of a loving and compassionate God Who loves all things? An answer to this important question might be found in the level of engagement or provision of “Creation Care” type courses by our Orthodox seminary and academic institutions. Indeed in light of these teachings, and the length of time these sound religious teachings, symposia, seminars, Halki Summits<sup>8</sup> etc., have been available to Orthodox scholars and

7 There are numerous teachings on this, and a good source is *Cosmic Grace, Humble Prayer: The Ecological Vision of the Green Patriarch Bartholomew*, ed. J. Chryssavgis, (Eerdmans, 2009.)

8 Over the last decades, the Ecumenical Patriarchate has advocated and advanced worldwide conversation and cooperation



clergy, one might reasonably conclude that these institutions would reflect these teachings in their courses. Yet, one of our leading theologians, Met. John Zizioulas in 2015, said the following: “In the traditional manuals of theology, there is hardly any place for ecology and the same is true for the academic curricula of the theological schools, Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant.”<sup>9</sup> The obvious question to ask here is: Was he correct?

The author researched this point as part of her PhD studies, and found in one 2007 study’s concluding remarks, the following statement that is particularly relevant: “In almost all cases environmental theology is still not really integrated into the curriculum of theological colleges.” (Weaver and Hodson 2007)<sup>10</sup> A second study, “Eco-Theology, Climate Justice and Food Security: Theological Education and Christian Leadership Development,” (Globethics.net et al 2014-15) is a global survey of seminary institutions<sup>11</sup> and has similar conclusions to the 2007 study and the author’s research. It states: “Despite the comparatively important place occupied by the ecologically related course in the university curriculum and the development of Orthodox networks and programs on ecological topics...eco-theology is almost absent from theological education.” It would seem that in 2015 Met. Zizioulas was correct; eco-theology was almost absent from Orthodox theological education at that time, and as yet we still do not know why.

To deal with this lack of engagement by these institutions, and as a form of encouragement to them, in 2019 His All-Holiness invited representatives from all Orthodox theological seminary colleges and Orthodox educational institutions to the Halki III Summit<sup>12</sup> in Istanbul, to discuss incorporating ecology and environmental awareness into their programs and curricula. The author was invited specifically to discuss animals, and gave a presentation entitled: “Establishing a module on compassionate care for animals in Orthodox academic and seminary courses.” The author did not show them the photograph shown in Fig. 1 below, which is more recent and from Elon Musk’s Neuralink lab, but rather, a slide depicting various forms of human cruelty to non-human animals. To note

among representatives of various disciplines and faiths, contributing to global awareness of the consequences of climate change but also discerning and effecting changes in values and social attitudes related to the abuse of God’s creation. See [HALKI SUMMIT | Heybeliada, Turkey](#).

9 John Zizioulas, “Commentary on Laudato Si.” Available at: <https://www.patriarchate.org/-/a-comment-on-pope-francis-encyclical-laudato-si->.

10 John Weaver and Margot R. Hodson, eds. *The Place of Environmental Theology: A Course Guide for Seminaries, Colleges and Universities* (Whitley Trust, UK and International Baptist Theological Seminary, Prague: 2007), 120. Available at ([biblical-studies.org.uk](http://biblical-studies.org.uk))

11 This was a collaborative project between Globethics.net (Geneva), Bread for the World (Berlin), United Evangelical Mission (Wuppertal) and the World Council of Churches in cooperation with the Orthodox Academy of Crete and Volos Academy for Theological Studies in Greece. This book can be downloaded for free from the Globethics.net Library, the leading global online library on ethics: [www.globethics.net](http://www.globethics.net).

12 See <http://www.halkisummit.com/hs3/>.



the suffering creature below, all of these poor innocent creatures had to be destroyed because of the extreme suffering and distress caused by this totally unnecessary experimental procedure to implant chips into their brains, so that humans can connect in some sort of telepathic way with mobile phones and the like in the near future.<sup>13</sup>

**Fig. 1.** Primate Animal Experiment in Neuralink



At Halki 111, the author proposed course content through the various themes posited:

- Patristics: Tradition; Hagiographies.
- Bible & Ecclesial texts: Luke 14:5; Canons; Liturgies.
- Soteriologically: The sin of abuse; Misuse of our freedom.
- Contemporary teachings on: Educating priests; Extending concepts.
- Scientifically: Ethnology; Suffering Capacities; Climate Instability; Dietary Choices.
- Mission: Outreach; Interfaith and Secular Institutions.

The aim was to:

<sup>13</sup> I have written in depth on this particular cruelty in my 2018 book. It is worth noting that there is an acknowledged failure rate of 90-97% when using animals in drug experimentation. See USFDA, *Innovation or Stagnation: Challenge and Opportunity on the Critical Path to New Medical Products*, 2004, which in part, led to their recent decision to end experiments on animals.



1. Develop the seminarians' understanding of their role as Icon of Christ in relation to their treatment, and relationship with animals and the environment.
2. Develop an understanding of the spiritual, and ontological interconnectedness of God's creation.
3. Help the seminarians reduce or prevent the suffering of animals within their parish by increasing their knowledge of animal protection, and environmental conservation practices.
4. Promote the teaching that the status of animal souls has nothing to do with how animals should be treated.

Four years later at the second International Orthodox Theological Association's Conference in Volos 2023, a group session of academics and clergy from various Orthodox theological colleges and institutions, gave presentations on their work. All of them were at the Halki 111 Summit. The opportunity presented itself for the author to enquire on what progress had been made regarding incorporating Creation Care and or Ecotheology into their curriculums since the 2019 Halki 111 Summit; the author is sad to report that there was silence.

So, the question again arises: Why do our seminaries and academies ignore the suffering of creation? I know that some Faculty heads argue against including compassion for animals into their curricula, stating that there are many other important subjects for priests or students to study, and as someone personally connected to the clergy, the author understands those pressures, *but* if we continue to ignore the suffering of the rest of God's creation, what image are we teaching and reflecting? Certainly not the Image of God.

In our collective failure to acknowledge the importance of the rest of God's creation, together with our institutional failure to include God's creation into our inner circle of compassionate care and love, we are guilty of promoting a heretical narrow separationist theology, rather than the traditional Orthodox theology - an inclusive Christocentric theology, where all things are to flourish through our role as Image of God.

## Breaking through the opposition

Alongside this lack of engagement by the academic and seminary institutions, a form of Public Theology was taking place through activities such as these: A PhD was undertaken on early and contemporary teachings



on animal suffering<sup>14</sup>; the Pan Orthodox Concern for Animals charity<sup>15</sup> was founded by one Metropolitan, two priests and one presbyter<sup>16</sup>; Special sessions on animal theology were presented by Orthodox theologians, philosophers, and ethicists at various conferences across Europe<sup>17</sup>; books<sup>18</sup>, journal articles<sup>19</sup>, and a parish educational course<sup>20</sup> were written on animal suffering, climate crisis and creation care, and international webinars were given on the work of Met. Kallistos and animals.<sup>21</sup> There is no data on a causal link between these public activities and the very recent development, and engagement with animal theology, but the author is not the only one to believe that such persistent engagement by some academics and clergy has had an impact on those around them who have increased their engagement.

In Norway (2025) the author presented their latest investigations into the current eco/animal theology courses available in Orthodox seminaries and academies in the USA, Asia Pacific, Australia, Japan, Europe (Western & Eastern). Again, it found that overall, hardly any of them engaged with the subjects under discussion.

Elizabeth Theokritoff<sup>22</sup> and the author have discussed the lack of engagement at parish level in the UK church and a quote from Theokritoff's 2021 video presentation at a Volos conference on "The good practices of the Orthodox Church addressing the climate crisis," relates to our conclusion:

14 C. Nellist, "Towards an Animal Theology in Eastern Orthodox Christianity" (PhD thesis, University of Winchester, 2017).

15 [Pan-Orthodox Concern for Animals – Eastern Orthodox Christian concern for animal suffering.](#)

16 Met. Kallistos of Diokleia, Fr. Simon Nellist, Fr. Andreas Andreopoulos, Dr. Christina Nellist.

17 E. g., POCA held Special Sessions on "Eastern Orthodox Perspectives on Animal Suffering" at both International Orthodox Theological Association conferences in Iasi, 2019 and Volos 2023; "The Animal-Based Diet: Important Considerations" presentation at the VOLOS Academy conference on "Food in the Anthropocene: Ecotheological and Scientific Perspectives," Volos, 2025.

18 C. Nellist, *Eastern Orthodox Christianity and Animal Suffering: Ancient Voices in Modern Theology*, (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017); C. Nellist, ed. *Climate Crisis and Creation Care: Historical Perspectives, Ecological Integrity, and Justice*. (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2021). Available at: <https://www.cambridgescholars.com/product/978-1-5275-7420-5>; C. Nellist, ed. *Climate Crisis and Sustainable Creaturely Care*. (Cambridge Scholars Pub. 2021). Available at <https://www.cambridgescholars.com/product/978-1-5275-7421-2>; Theodota Nantsou & Nikolaos Asproulis, eds. *The Orthodox Church Addresses the Climate Crisis*. (WWF Greece & Volos Academy Publications, Volos & Athens, 2021). Available at: <https://ecen.org/articles/orthodox-church-addresses-climate-crisis>

19 E. g., C. Nellist, "Eastern Orthodox Christianity and Animal Suffering" Greek Orthodox Theological Review 61:3-4, 2016; C. Nellist, "An Eastern Orthodox Perspective on Animal Suffering, Intensive Farming and Climate Change" *International Journal of Orthodox Theology* 9:3 (2018) 144-172.

20 "Creation Care: Christian Responsibility Course", available at [Creation Care: Christian Responsibility Course – Pan-Orthodox Concern for Animals.](#)

21 [Summary of Webinar on the topic "Conversations with Metropolitan Kallistos Ware on Care of Animals and the Environment" - Ακαδημία Θεολογικών Σπουδών Βόλου "Discussions" with Metr. Kallistos of Diokleia on care for animals and the environment](#) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ydRa9PvjbdI>; [Summary of Webinar METROPOLITAN KALLISTOS' RECOLLECTIONS OF HIS ENCOUNTERS WITH ANIMALS - Ακαδημία Θεολογικών Σπουδών Βόλου](#)

22 Elizabeth Theokritoff is a lecturer at the Institute of Orthodox Christian Studies, Cambridge. UK.



The first thing that I have to say, and this is very sad and very embarrassing, is that so far as I have been able to discover among the Orthodox here, is that there is nil interest and practical response to the environmental crisis generally, or the imminent COP26 conference in particular. Of course there are individual initiatives...but at the level of dioceses, parishes, and clergy, again generally, there seems to be no interest, no concern to make theological connections or to offer any guidance on how our Orthodox faith might inform our responses, or indeed practices of greening our parishes...this represents a shocking failure of witness, and a pastoral failure, it's a really tragic missed opportunity to engage especially with the youth. There is no adequate excuse for this...<sup>23</sup>

However, there are now a few precious examples of engagement, and it is important to examine them. Here is a summary of the few Eastern Orthodox institutions that have offered/offer modules/conferences on ecology, creation care, or ecotheology.

1. *Crete Institute for Theology and Ecology - Orthodox Academy of Crete*.<sup>24</sup> A dedicated institute founded in 1991. Whilst there are no structured or regular courses, it fosters meaningful dialogue, and education at the intersection of theology and ecology and organizes conferences on ecological theology and environmental ethics.
2. *Institute for Orthodox Christian Studies (IOCS)*, Cambridge, UK<sup>25</sup> was established in 1999, and offers an Open MA Module, *Christianity and Ecology*. This is a good course incorporating patristic theology, worship, asceticism, and modern ecological theology. It is taught by the highly respected Dr. Elizabeth Theokritoff and began in 2024. The key text is her 2009 work, *Living in God's Creation: Orthodox Perspectives on Ecology*.<sup>26</sup>
3. *Volos Academy for Theological Studies*<sup>27</sup> (Volos) was established in 2000. In 2016, it held an international conference on "Eco-Theology, Climate Justice, and Food Security." In 2021, the Volos Academy in cooperation with WWF Greece organized an international online conference on the general topic: "The

23 [Green Parish Video Library - Volos Academy for Theological Studies](#)

24 [Institute for Theology and Ecology - Orthodox Academy of Crete](#)

25 [The Institute for Orthodox Christian Studies – A home for generous Orthodoxy](#)

26 Elizabeth Theokritoff, *Living in God's Creation: Orthodox Perspectives on Ecology*. (SVSP, 2009). (Hereinafter *Living*)

27 [The Volos Academy for Theological Studies - Ακαδημία Θεολογικών Σπουδών Βόλου](#)



good practices of the Orthodox Church addressing the climate crisis, in view of the UN FCCC COP26.” In 2022-23 it chose as its theme “Encountering Global Orthodoxy,”<sup>28</sup> which included a conference on “Ecotheology, Climate Justice and Food Security.” In 2024 it organised a Volos team at the European Academy of Religion, (EUARE)<sup>29</sup> on the topic of “Orthodox Christian Theological Reflection and Response to the Anthropocene: Time for action against climate crisis.” In 2025 they organised an international conference on the theme “Food in the Anthropocene: Ecotheological and Scientific Perspectives”<sup>30</sup>, and produced a book from the 2021 conference entitled *Eastern Orthodox Churches Go Green: From Ecotheology to Ecopraxis*.<sup>31</sup> In 2025 they, in collaboration with senior Orthodox theologians, the University of Tartu and the Church of Estonia, have also produced a new ecotheology module and I shall examine this presently.

4. *Huffington Ecumenical Institute*<sup>32</sup> (HEI) is part of the Hellenic College & Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology, USA. In Spring 2025 it began the course: *The Soul and the Soil: Orthodox Christianity and the Natural Environment*.<sup>33</sup> This is another good course that explores Orthodox responses to the climate crisis, highlighting the Ecumenical Patriarchate’s role, synodal texts, and contemporary Orthodox voices, and again, I shall examine this presently.

Apart from these excellent examples, overall, there is still very little engagement from the rest of the Orthodox academies and seminaries across the world, despite the fact that Ethics or Bio-Ethics courses are available at many institutions; so the potential for inclusion already exists. To bolster, this point I return briefly to the earlier list of seminaries that were examined in the author’s research and highlight the well-respected St. Sergius Orthodox Theological Institute in France,<sup>34</sup> which through their Bioethics module, offer the following module: *Technology and Transhumanism. An orthodox vision of human transformations (BE)*.

28 [Academic year 2022-2023 - Ακαδημία Θεολογικών Σπουδών Βόλου](#)

29 <https://www.europeanacademyofreligion.org/>

30 [International Conference in the theme “Food in the Anthropocene: Ecotheological and Scientific Perspectives” - Ακαδημία Θεολογικών Σπουδών Βόλου](#)

31 <https://www.academia.org/en/news-announcements/press/1372-new-publication-eastern-orthodox-church-es-go-green-from-ecotheology-to-ecopraxis>.

32 <https://huffingtoninstitute.hchc.edu/>

33 <https://enrollment.hchc.edu/online-courses>

34 [Saint-Serge – Institut de théologie orthodoxe](#)



There *was*, therefore, space in the syllabus for ecotheology, or creation care, but this institute, like the majority of seminaries and academies, still choose not to do so, and the question as to why, remains unanswered.

In addition to this problem is the fact that there is a dimension of theology that until very recently has been absent in virtually all serious Orthodox discussions and that is Animal Theology. The author accepts that the term does not necessarily translate well into other languages, Greek for example, and therefore gives some examples of accepted definitions:

- a. Animal Theology is a branch of Christian Theology, that explores the moral and spiritual status of animals, arguing that God’s salvation extends to all creation, not just humanity.
- b. Animal Theology seeks to understand the place of animals in the Christian faith, promoting a theocentric framework where all creatures are valued as part of God’s creation, and resulting in new insights about our relationship with God’s other creatures.
- c. Animal Theology critiques traditional Christian doctrines that deny animals an immortal soul, justice, moral consideration, and advocates for a more inclusive view of creation.
- d. Animal Theology applies traditional theology to address contemporary animal suffering issues such as direct cruelty, exploitation, fur-farming, recreational hunting, experimenting on animals, the animal-based diet and climate instability, etc.

As a result of this specific lack of engagement, the author looked again at the Orthodox institutions’ course descriptions and available outlines, assessing how Animal Theology appears, or has the potential to be included, in their ecotheology related courses:

- *Crete Institute for Theology and Ecology* – There is the potential, due to its conference-style structure. Whilst it has no fixed syllabus, past conferences have addressed biodiversity, protection of endangered species, and theological respect for all creation. Whether animals are a major theological focus will depend on the specific seminar/conference. Some programs have included sessions on the theological value of non-human life, but not consistently.
- *IOCS* - In their “Christianity and Ecology” course, Session 4 *Place of man in creation, and Ascetic tradition*; Session 5 also touches



on human–animal relationships from an Orthodox anthropological perspective. In Session 6 *Saints: Compassion for creatures, paradise restored*, it covers the saints’ compassion toward animals, patristic teachings on animals, and restored creation imagery. Whilst there is some coverage, Animal Theology as a subject per se, is not covered. The key text *Living in God’s Creation* (Theokritoff 2009)<sup>35</sup> contains a small section explicitly on animals. “Animals in the Service of Man” has three pages with only limited discussions, followed by a section “Man in the Service of animals,” also three pages. However, Theokritoff does discuss animals at times throughout her work, so this is a good text to have as reading material for any course. It has, however, no capacity to discuss contemporary animal suffering issues.

- *Volos* - In its 2023 Ecotheology Summer School they included presentations on “A Critical Review of the Creation Care Christian Responsibility Course, and subsequent Academic Study,” and “The Interdependence of Animal and Environmental Protection and Sustainable Development.” In 2024, the Volos team chose as its topic for the (EUARE) conference, the topic of “Orthodox Christian Theological Reflection and Response to the Anthropocene: Time for Action against Climate Crisis.” This included a presentation on “How can animals, or rather the lack of them, help us in our war against climate change?” In May 2025, they held an international conference in Volos, on the theme “Food in the Anthropocene: Ecotheological and Scientific Perspectives” which included a presentation on “The Animal-Based Diet: Important Considerations.” As noted, in September 2025, the Volos Academy developed its “Orthodox Church and Contemporary Challenges” theme. Within this new course there is a specific theme relating to Animal Theology. It therefore acts as a working template for other Orthodox institutions and seminaries to adopt/adapt, and I shall look at this excellent course in more detail presently.
- *HEI* -In their excellent course “The Soul and the Soil” there is an element of Animal Theology in a week 8, “Animal Theology: Anthropology Revisited.” There is also a section on the teachings of His All-Holiness Bartholomew, who it is important to note again, has given teachings that cruelty to, and exploitation of,

35 Theokritoff, *Living*.



both the animals and the wider creation, are sins that require repentance and changes in behaviour. It is also important to note that this course is a direct result of the Halki III Summit on the need to include care for creation and animals within seminary and academic courses. It too, acts as a working template for other Orthodox institutions and seminaries to adopt/adapt and I shall also look at this excellent course in more detail presently.

- *Thessaloniki* – There is no existing course, however, two of their professors, Eleni Antonopoulou<sup>36</sup> and Ekaterini Tsalampouni,<sup>37</sup> produced a chapter titled “Designing a Green Curriculum of Orthodox theology: A Modest Proposal” for the 2021 book *Climate Crisis and Creation Care: Historical Perspectives, Ecological Integrity and Justice*.<sup>38</sup> In essence it was a case study of one of their modules “Theology, natural sciences and the environment” available at that time from the School of Pastoral and Social Theology, at Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (Greece). Fig. 2 below is an outline of the content and sections:

Fig. 2. Module Outline Aristotle University, Thessaloniki, Greece. 2020/1

## Animals - Theology and Science

2020-21	<p><i>Animals</i></p> <p>The Creation story underlines the relationship between humans and other creatures, mainly animals. According to the Bible animals are not just companions and helpers of human beings, but often teach humans about the Creator. Furthermore, animality is an element of human existence, something discussed already by ancient philosophers. This year’s course aims to highlight this relationship between humans and the animal kingdom, to investigate the importance of animals for human existence as understood by Christian tradition and other world religions and to develop a dialogue with other sciences.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Introduction to the topic and the course.</li> <li>2. Animals and human beings in the Old Testament</li> <li>3. Animals and human beings in the New Testament and early Christianity</li> <li>4. Orthodox theology and animals</li> <li>5. The position of the Church Fathers on animals</li> <li>6. Animals and human beings in the religions of the world</li> <li>7. Threatened species</li> <li>8. Animal rights</li> <li>9. Zoonotic diseases</li> <li>10. Animals in world literature</li> <li>11. Christian ethics and animals</li> <li>12. Animal biology</li> <li>13. Quiz - in-class exercise - conclusions.</li> </ol>
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36 Eleni Antonopoulou is Associate Professor at the School of Social Theology and Christian Culture of the Faculty of Theology of Aristotle University of Thessaloniki.

37 Ekaterini Tsalampouni is Associate Professor at the School of Social Theology and Christian Culture of the Faculty of Theology of Aristotle University of Thessaloniki.

38 See note 11 above.



This is a good course, but it is to be noted that discussions on the causes of Zoonosis was offered during the Covid pandemic and has not run since. Nonetheless, it remains a good outline for a module, and one hopes that it will be reinstated, or perhaps used as an outline to be included into any course that the academic or seminary audience might consider offering.

In summary, when we consider the large number of colleges/institutions across the world, there is still minimal engagement with ecotheology, and an almost total lack of engagement with Animal Theology in academic institutions/universities, and even less within our seminaries. Why is that the case? The question remains unanswered.

As is clearly evidenced from the above research, the potential – the space in the seminary and academic curriculum is there, but the desire to engage with the suffering of God’s other creatures seems consistently poor. As Met. John Zizioulas noted earlier, we are not alone. Celia Deane-Drummond<sup>39</sup> has asked the same question of the Catholic church and posited that it may be a “residue of guilt left towards animals that theologians do not want to face - yet they discuss guilt and reconciliation elsewhere.”<sup>40</sup> Perhaps it is that concern for animals would take precedence, yet rightly states:

that there is no evidence that attending to non-human creatures will have deleterious consequences for human beings. Or perhaps it is that those already locked into the established field do not wish to stray yet new insight into theological anthropology is one of the benefits of this kind of research.<sup>41</sup>

It could also be, as the author has stated elsewhere, and as St Isaac the Syrian rightly predicted, in this fallen world, those who exhibit compassion for others will likely be denounced, and many will scoff at one’s perceived “liberality.”<sup>42</sup> We must, however, hold fast to the teachings of Christ, and push through this intransigence and indifference. And to that end there is a glimmer of hope and further development.

39 Celia Deane-Drummond is Director of the Laudato Si’ Research Institute and Senior Research Fellow in Theology at Campion Hall, University of Oxford, UK.

40 Celia Deane-Drummond and David Clough, eds. *Creaturely Theology: On God, Humans and Other Animals*. (SCM Press, 2009), 15.

41 Ibid. To buttress this point see Kaurov, A.A., Cherhykalo, D., Javeline, D. et al. Unspoken crisis: the absence of climate change communication in U.S. Catholic churches. *Climatic Change* 178, 164 (2025). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10584-025-04001-7>; <https://www.ncronline.org/earthbeat/faith/us-church-failing-popes-climate-goals-bishops-say-private-conference>

42 St Isaac, *Six Treatises on the Behaviour of Excellence*, Treatise 1, Ch. 1, *Mystic Treatises*, 54. He is not alone Fr John Breck comments that “any good Christian ethicist needs to be courageous” for they are likely “to get attacked from all sides.” See J. and L. Breck, *Stages on Life’s Way: Orthodox Thinking on Bioethics*. (SVSP, 2005), 4-5.



## Lights Shining in the Darkness

We might begin by stating that “lights” in this context is understood two-fold and relates to the senior theologians who are developing courses that encompass the entire creation, and the courses themselves. Each stand as beacons of light within academic and seminarian institutions.

### THE SOUL AND THE SOIL

In Spring 2025, the Huffington Ecumenical Institute added the “Soul and the Soil: Orthodox Christianity and the Natural Environment” module onto its list of courses. This excellent course, includes a session dedicated to Animal Theology from an Orthodox perspective, “Animal Theology: Anthropology Revisited.” In the Course Learning Outcomes, it expects the students to:

- a. recognize the current status of animal suffering.
- b. interpret the *imago Dei* fundamental anthropological doctrine in an animal-friendly way.

There is also a Discussion Question: What are the key tenets of an Orthodox animal theology?

As noted, the course also includes a section on the teachings of His All-Holiness Bartholomew, who it is important to note again, has given teachings that cruelty to, and exploitation of, both the animals and the wider creation, are sins that requires repentance and changes in behaviour. It is also important to note that this course is a direct result of the Halki III Summit on the need to include care for creation and animals within seminary and academic courses.

### ANIMAL THEOLOGY

The second “light” arises from the Volos Academy’s development of its “Orthodox Church and Contemporary Challenges” theme. As noted, it has produced the module outlined in Fig. 3 below.<sup>43</sup> This course began in September 2025, and has two overarching themes:

1. Nature and the Environment in the Orthodox Christian Tradition: Creation, Salvation, and Eschatology.

<sup>43</sup> [Micro-credential programme “Orthodox Church and Contemporary Challenges” | University of Tartu](#)



## 2. Contemporary Orthodox Christian Activism in Overcoming the Ecological Crisis and the Role of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in it: Climate, Justice, and Environmental Ethics.

Once the students have acquired an historical understanding of the spiritual roots of the ecological crisis, it focuses on the most important historical, and doctrinal trends in eco-theology. It is important to acknowledge here that at last, Animal Theology is on the Orthodox agenda in its own right.

Fig. 3. 2025 Module Outline, University of Tartu, Estonia.

# ECOTHEOLOGY

## SEPTEMBER 19, 2025

Rev. Dr. John Chryssavgis: "Religion and Science: The Climate Crisis and the Orthodox Church"

Prof. Dr. Aikaterini Tsalampouni:

1. Reading the Bible through the Eco-theological Lenses: Principles, Methods, and Typology
2. Applying ecological critical hermeneutics (biblical examples)

## SEPTEMBER 19, 2025

1. Water in the Bible: an Ecotheological Critical Reading
2. Plants in the Bible: An Ecotheological Critical Reading
3. How to Deal with Apocalyptic Biblical Texts Amidst the Ecological Crisis

## OCTOBER 17, 2025

Dr. Nikolaos Asproulis

1. The State of the Arts: The Climate Crisis and the Anthropocene
2. Christian Initiatives toward Creation Care
3. The Ecumenical Patriarchate Towards Creation Care: History, Holy and Great Synod (Crete, 2016); For The Life of the World Document (2020)

## OCTOBER 18, 2025

1. Eco-Dogmatics I: Towards a New Model of Doing Theology (Theological Method, Creation Theology, Christology)
2. Eco-Dogmatics II: (Eucharist, Spirituality, Ethics)

## NOVEMBER 14, 2025

Dr. Nikolaos Asproulis

1. Animal Theology: Humans and non-human beings
2. Towards an Orthodox Water Theology
3. War and the Climate Crisis

## NOVEMBER 15, 2025

1. Theological Education and the Climate Crisis
2. Contemporary Theologians and the Natural Environment
3. Contemporary Saints, Good Practices, and the Creation Care

## DECEMBER 12, 2025

Prof. Dr. Aikaterini Tsalampouni

1. Ecofeminism and Sustainability Hermeneutics
2. Ecojustice and the Bible
3. Towards a Theology of Food in the Bible

## DECEMBER 13, 2025

1. The role of humans in the creation: a biblical perspective
2. The praise of the creation from a biblical perspective
3. The Green Goals of UN and Ecological Hermeneutics

This important theological subject can be taught in a variety of ways, and in this specific course, Asproulis<sup>44</sup> has wisely chosen to incorporate four main traditional areas. I have chosen samples from each section of the course outline:

### 1. *The Eucharist as Cosmic Liturgy: Deep Eucharist:*

The Eucharist, as a living memory of all those who suffer, calls the Christian community to a new solidarity that involves all the human victims as well as the animals and plants that are destroyed or threatened...During the Divine Eucharist, the whole

44 Nikolaos Asproulis is Dep. Director of the Volos Academy for Theological Studies, Volos, Greece, and Chair of Pan-Orthodox Concern for Animals Charity. See [Who we are – Pan-Orthodox Concern for Animals](#)



creation is offered to the hands of God the Father so as to live eternally. Bread and wine (materiality), the very basic products of human labor are offered to God the Father as the Body and Blood of Christ not only for the sake of humanity but primarily for the transformation and salvation of the entire creation (theosis = as a cosmological concept)...We remember the God who loves each one of them. We grieve for the damage done to them.

2. *Priests of Creation:*

The ancient liturgies of the church point very specifically to man's priestly action as representative of creation. This can be seen in the fact that the Eucharistic liturgies began their canon with a thanksgiving for creation in the first place, and only afterwards for redemption through Christ...Human being as the priest of creation and not just a steward has been endowed with responsibility (*imago dei*) and not only the duty to protect and care for creation (Genesis 2:14)...Material creation is not treated as a means of obtaining pleasure and happiness for the individual (cf. managerial way), but as a sacred gift from God which is meant to foster and promote communion with God and with others.

3. *Aspects of Eco-asceticism:*

The cross of Christ reminds us of the need for a cosmic repentance. In order to alter our attitudes and lifestyles, what is required is a radical reversal of our perspectives and practices. The environmental crisis will not be solved by simply expressing regret. The "tree of the cross" reveals the way out of our ecological impasse by proposing the solution of self-denial, the denial of selfishness or self-centeredness. Asceticism leads to the spirit of gratitude and love, to a rediscovery of wonder and beauty. Asceticism is traveling lightly; it is using and consuming less...And, finally, all of our actions toward God are also actions toward the earth and toward one another (ontological interconnectedness). This is most clearly seen in our celebration of the Eucharist—a celebration we are invited to work into our daily lives and into the wider world.

4. *Eco-spirituality*

Eco-spirituality is an approach to faith that celebrates humanity's connection to the natural world (ontological interconnectedness). Eco-spirituality usually seeks to link the tenets of a specific belief



system to the sacredness of the earth (from theology of creation to eco-spirituality.) The Key points are that:

- Humans are not separate from nature (interconnectedness).
- Humans do not own nature exclusively for our own gain.
- Humans ought to act as priests of creation.
- We must demonstrate a love of creation through caring acts.
- God is the cause of creation and deeply embedded (through the incarnation etc.,) in it.
- We can have access to God (even limited) through the natural world.

In summary, these two courses establishes that, with good will and a firm Orthodox conviction that all things are interconnected at an ontological level, and in relationship with our Creator God, who loves and cares for each creature in His Good Creation, one can find space within the Orthodox institutional curriculum for a form of theology that acknowledges this important theological area.

Through courses such as these, we are also able to fulfil the mission given to each of us in the bible to teach the good news of Christ, who loves all things in his very good creation. The author thus recommends both modules to those in charge of our academies and seminaries, as examples of best practise within Orthodoxy at this present time.

Lastly, there is one further development worth mentioning. This is a joint project between the Huffington Ecumenical Institute and the Pan Orthodox Concern for Animals Charity. It is in the form of a global essay competition for graduate students in Eastern and Oriental Orthodox seminaries and accredited theological programs. The overarching theme is “Advancing Christian Respect and Responsibility for Animals” and its aim is threefold:

1. To promote Christian responsibility towards animals.
2. To generate more academic level material.
3. To encourage more theological engagement in care for the animal creation.

This competition has funding for the next four years and also offers the winning entries publication in the Greek Orthodox Theological Review. Essays are reviewed by an international panel of Orthodox clergy, scholars and experts in theology, ethics, environmental and animal studies. Submissions are judged on academic merit and originality; theological and



ethical insight; clarity of argument; contribution to Orthodox Christian engagement to animal welfare and ecology. The competition was favourably received as a creative way for Orthodox institutions to engage with the subject discussed. This year's winning entries are found on the institutions' websites.<sup>45</sup>

## Conclusion

In Acts 8:30, Philip asks the Ethiopian eunuch sitting in the chariot: "Do you understand what you are reading?" The answer to this question in Acts is "How can I unless someone guides me?"

Our great mission to spread the joy of Christ's Incarnation and Resurrection was given to us at Pentecost by Christ's disciples. It demands engagement with others and requires us to teach the Good News of Christ. One of the fundamental tenets of Orthodoxy is that this Good News is relevant to all - God loves and cares for all things in His very good creation. This mission was given to us all; we are all priests in this sense.

Eastern Orthodox Christianity is often held up as the Christian faith with the best ecological theology, and the author believes this is the case; we certainly have the teachings, and from the earliest centuries. However, we also know through the research from the author and others mentioned above, that there is an acknowledged gap between our theory and our practise. This is evidenced by the continuing lack of engagement with eco and animal theology by our academic and seminary institutions, and could be the answer to why there is at best, add-hoc engagement at parish level.

We have these past few years begun to see the first fruits of years of seed-sowing by the Holy Spirit, through our Patriarchs Demetrius and Bartholomew, and from the work of other dedicated clergy and scholars such as Met. Kallistos of Diokleia, Met. John of Pergamon, Fr John Chryssavgis,<sup>46</sup> Dr Elizabeth Theokritoff, Dr Nikolaos Asproulis, Dr. Christina Nellist and Dr David Goodin<sup>47</sup> to name a few, and by God's Grace, their number is growing.

<sup>45</sup> The winning articles are published on both institutions' websites and found here: [Experiencing Pain as if in Martyrdom: Ruthie's Example – Pan-Orthodox Concern for Animals](#); [Advancing Christian Respect and Responsibility for Animals – Pan-Orthodox Concern for Animals](#).

<sup>46</sup> Fr John is Archdeacon of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, serving as theological advisor to Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew. He is also Executive Director of the Huffington Ecumenical Institute, Hellenic College Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology, USA. See [Who we are – Pan-Orthodox Concern for Animals](#)

<sup>47</sup> David Goodin is Professeur Associé, Université Laval, Institut de Théologie Orthodoxe de Montréal. See [Who we are – Pan-Orthodox Concern for Animals](#)



The author therefore encourages those in both Orthodox and non-Orthodox institutions and seminaries who have the power to incorporate a section specifically on Animal Theology, perhaps in the wider framework of an Eco-theology module, to do so; for if we are to discuss the rising sea-levels, we need to discuss the plight of the polar bears. If we want to discuss food security, we must look at the inefficient, wasteful, and cruel animal-based dietary model and the nexus of associated problems it produces, not only for the sake of the animals, but also for us.

If we do not, then again, we shall continue to “miss the mark.” We shall fail to grasp the opportunity that the Holy Spirit brings before us today, and every day, to teach the real image of God, who loves all things, in His very good creation.

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