



Priests of Creation: Ecological Anthropology from the Perspectives the Old Testament and Orthodox Theology

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Abstract

The ecological crisis is rooted in anthropological reductionisms of modernity. The understanding of humans as “priests of creation” addresses this need for an anthropological reorientation. The paper shows the convergence of biblical (Gen 2–3; Ps 19; 29 etc.) and orthodox theology (John Zizioulas) regarding the mediatory role of humans between God and creation.

Keywords: Orthodox Theology; Biblical Anthropology; Priest of Creation; John Zizioulas; Anthropocene



Introduction

Our present multiple ecological crisis is, not least when understood on a broader term as “Anthropocene crisis”¹, as much an anthropological and cultural issue as an ethical challenge.² In Pope Francis’ words, “a certain way of understanding human life and activity has gone awry, to the serious detriment of the world around us.”³ Against this background, my contribution focuses on anthropological aspects of ecotheology. More precisely, the aim of this brief study is to highlight the points of convergence between Orthodox and Old Testament theology regarding the understanding of humans as “priests of creation”⁴. This anthropological concept has its origin in Patristic theology (Gregory of Nissa, Maximus the Confessor), but it was mainly in the late twentieth century that Orthodox theologians, mainly Kallistos Ware and John Zizioulas, developed and deepened the notion.⁵ Amongst Protestant theology, Thomas F. Torrance, Jürgen Moltmann, Peter Clavier, and others have taken up the idea, although not extensively.⁶ In a nutshell, the term attributes to humans a mediatory role between God and creation: Human beings act as priests of creation by passing on God’s work of salvation to all fellow creatures, offering thanks to the Creator on their behalf, together with them, and through them.

In the following, I will briefly discuss the reductionist tendencies of the anthropologies of modernity from which our present ecological crises originated and with which it is intertwined. Against this backdrop, I will present the understanding of humans as priests of creation based on the Eden Narrative (Genesis 2 and 3) and the Psalter, particularly Ps

1 John B. Foster, “The Anthropocene Crisis,” *Monthly Review* 68, no. 4 (2016), https://doi.org/10.14452/MR-068-04-2016-08_2.

2 Cf. Christoph Antweiler, *Anthropology in the Anthropocene: An Earthed Theory for Our Extended Present* (Springer, 2024). John Zizioulas, “Humanity and Nature: Learning from the Indigenous,” in *Priests of Creation: John Zizioulas on Discerning an Ecological Ethos*, ed. John Chryssavgis and Nikolaos Asproulis (T&T Clark, 2021), 186–96.

3 Francis, *Laudato Si* [Praise Be to You], sec. 101, (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 2013). In a similar way, Pope Leo in his encyclical letter recognizes that in our days “humanity is in danger of marring its true identity” and warns of the “risk of dehumanization”. Leo XIV., *Magnifica Humanitas* [Magnificent Humanity], sec. 1 and 10, (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 2026).

4 For a brief overview on the history and meaning of the term cf. George H. Kehm, “Priest of Creation,” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 14, no. 1 (1992): 129–42.

5 Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way* (St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001); Kallistos Ware, “Through the Creation to the Creator,” in *Toward an Ecology of Transfiguration: Orthodox Christian Perspectives on Environment, Nature, and Creation*, ed. Bruce V. Foltz and John Chryssavgis (Fordham University Press, 2013), 86–105; John Zizioulas, “Man the Priest of Creation,” in *Living Orthodoxy in the Modern World: Orthodox Christianity and Society*, ed. Andrew Walker and Costa Carras (St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2000), 178–88; John Zizioulas, *Eucharistic Communion and the World* (T&T Clark, 2011); John Zizioulas, “Proprietors or Priests of Creation?,” in Foltz and Chryssavgis, *Ecology of Transfiguration*, 163–72; John Zizioulas, *The Meaning of Being Human* (Sebastian Press, 2021); John Chryssavgis and Nikolaos Asproulis, eds., *Priests of Creation: John Zizioulas on Discerning an Ecological Ethos* (T&T Clark, 2021).

6 Thomas F. Torrance, *The Ground and Grammar of Theology* (University Press of Virginia, 1980), 1–14; Thomas F. Torrance, “The Goodness and Dignity of Man in the Christian Tradition”, in *Christ in Our Place: The Humanity of God in Christ for the Reconciliation of the World*, ed. Trevor A. Hart and Daniel P. Thimell (Pickwick, 1989), 69–87; Jürgen Moltmann, *Gott in der Schöpfung: Ökologische Schöpfungslehre* (Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2016), 83–4; Mark Clavier, *Stewards of God’s Delight: Becoming Priests of the New Creation* (Cascade, 2016).



19 and 29 as well as 148 and 150. Finally, I will show how this notion is reflected in present-day Orthodox theology, particularly in the work of John Zizioulas.

Overcoming Reductionist Anthropologies of Modernity

According to Zizioulas' analysis, the reductionist tendencies in the anthropologies of modernity are basically fourfold:

- the reduction of reason to rationality in the sense of a “purely intellectual activity”, whereby the world is seen as an object, “a set of useful and productive pieces”, instead of perceiving it “as a harmonious and unified whole”;⁷
- the individualistic reduction of human relationality, what leads to “the separation of human life from nature”;⁸
- the loss of the symbolic dimension in our relationship to nature, even though all creation is, for human beings, a “cosmic liturgy” (Maximus the Confessor), “full of symbols”;⁹
- the reduction of ethos, which is “applied within a culture and presupposes community”, to ethics in the sense of a “prescribed code of behavior”.¹⁰

The sense of loss caused by the anthropological reductionisms of modernity is felt also by a wide range of thinkers outside the realm of Christian theology or religious denominations altogether. I will limit myself here to just two examples that may suffice to illustrate how secular perspectives to some extent overlap with the core points of Zizioulas' analysis:

- The American philosopher and cultural ecologist David Abram detects a “collective perceptual disorder in our species, a unique form of myopia which it now forces us to correct” as we fail to recognize our “own embodiment as entirely internal to, and thus wholly dependent upon, the vaster body of the Earth”.¹¹ Abram therefore calls for the return to “a participatory mode of perception”, which

7 John Zizioulas, “An Orthodox Response to the Environmental Challenge,” in Chryssavgis and Asproulis, *Priests of Creation*, 73–89, 79.

8 John Zizioulas, “Communion and Communication,” in Chryssavgis and Asproulis, *Priests of Creation*, 210–3, 211.

9 John Zizioulas, “Toward an Environmental Ethic,” in Chryssavgis and Asproulis, *Priests of Creation*, 160–71, 169.

10 John Zizioulas, “Ethics or Ethos? A Brief Sketch,” in Chryssavgis and Asproulis, *Priests of Creation*, 157–9.

11 David Abram, “Merleau-Ponty and the Voice of the Earth,” *Environmental Ethics* 10, no. 2 (1988): 101–20, 101.



implies the “instinctive expectation of animateness, of an interior spontaneity proper to all things.”¹²

- In a similar vein, the German biologist and philosopher Andreas Weber sees the modern way of life as inducing the sensation of being “foreign and therefore unwelcome” in our world;¹³ in order to overcome this anthropological dead end, Weber invites to the awareness of the wealth of reciprocal relationships in which we are immersed and, as a result, to participate in a “cosmology of being alive together with the world.”¹⁴

The understanding of humans as priests of creation addresses and overcomes the anthropological reductionisms outlined here, as I will try to show in the following by presenting its rootedness in the Old Testament and the reflections on it in Orthodox theology.

The Priestly Role of Humans in the Old Testament

The understanding of humans as priests of creation is an important but widely overlooked aspect of the anthropology of the Old Testament. In the following, I will focus on the priestly traits of humans in the Eden Narrative (Gen 2–3) and their role in the cosmic liturgy as depicted in several psalms.

THE EDEN NARRATIVE (GEN 2–3)

As Bernd Janowski has pointed out, a mutual relationship between the creation account in Gen 1 and the construction of the tabernacle in Exod 25–40 may be discerned:¹⁵ On the one hand, the cosmos is depicted in Gen 1:1–2:3 as having traits of a sanctuary, on the other hand, the sanctuary described in Ex 25–31 (and 35–40) to some extent mirrors the whole creation. Namely, both the creation account and the building of the sanctuary follow a seven-day-pattern, and both end with the “completion” (כלה Gen 2:1, 2; Ex 39:32; 40:33) of the “work” (מלאכה Gen 2:2, 3; Ex 39:43; 40:33). Therefore Janowski concludes: “At Sinai, Israel discovers the creation-theological mystery of the seventh day, because in the cultic presence

12 David Abram, *Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2010), 53–4.

13 Andreas Weber, *Indigenialität* (Matthes & Seitz, 2024), 46 (my translation).

14 Weber, *Indigenialität*, 10 (my translation).

15 Bernd Janowski, “Tempel und Schöpfung. Schöpfungstheologische Aspekte der priesterschriftlichen Heiligtumskonzeption,” in *Gottes Gegenwart in Israel: Beiträge zur Theologie des Alten Testaments*, ed. Bernd Janowski (Neukirchener, 2004), 214–46.



of the God of Sinai dwelling in the tabernacle (Ex 24:15–18; 40:34–38) and in the celebration of the first sacrificial service (Lev 9:1–24), God’s intention to enter into communion with humankind becomes a concrete reality for Israel. (...) The process of establishing the people of Yhwh, which finally became apparent with the erection of the sanctuary on Mount Sinai, thus bears the hallmarks of a ‘creation within creation’, or rather a ‘new creation’ of Israel and the world it lives in by Yhwh.”¹⁶

However, the analogy between the cosmos and the sanctuary does not end here. According to Gen 2:15, man is put in the garden in order to work it and to keep it:

“Yhwh God took (וַיִּקַּח) the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it (לְעַבְדָּהּ) and keep it (לְשָׁמְרָהּ).”

In a recent article, Benjamin Kilchör has shown that there are striking parallels between the appointment of Aaron and his sons as priests in the tabernacle in Lev 8–10 and the Eden narrative in Gen 2–3.¹⁷ I will limit myself here on highlighting the cultic connotations of the verbs in the verse Gen 2:15 I just cited: As man is “taken” (לָקַח) by God and put in the garden, so according to Num 18:6 etc. the Levites are “taken” by God from among the Israelites. Moreover, man’s task in the garden is described with the same verbs that are used to denote the duties of the priests in the sanctuary: As man is set to “keep” the garden, the priests are required to “keep” the ordinances of the cult; and as man is required to “serve” the garden, so the priests have to “serve” in the sanctuary (cf. Num 3:7). The priestly role of humans in relation to creation that comes to fore here to my view is as important in Old Testament anthropology as the royal metaphor that turns up in Gen 1:26–28 and in Ps 8:6–7. A mediatory role between God and creation is evident also in the flood narrative, where Noah represents humanity,¹⁸ and one might mention other examples. In the following, however, I want to focus on the Psalter.

PSALMS

Ps 19 consists of two parts: The first part (vv.2–7) describes the constant praise of creation; the second part continues with a meditation on God’s instruction / the Torah (vv.8–15). More specifically, the first part tells of the communication that takes place among the elements of creation—a

16 Janowski, “Tempel und Schöpfung,” 238–40 (my translation).

17 Benjamin Kilchör, “The Eighth Day: The Appointment of Adam as Priest in Eden and the Priestly Profile of Genesis 2–3,” *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 36, no. 2 (2022): 255–66. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09018328.2022.2114188>.

18 Cf. Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* (Word Books, 1987), 191.



communication from “day to day”, from one night to the next; and the sun carries the message “to the ends of the earth” (vv.3, 5). According to Alexandra Grund, Ps 19 thus tells of “the wisdom inherent in creation”¹⁹, and for Mari Joerstad, the Psalm “describes something like nonanimal nature’s practice of theology, one that is only minimally accessible to humans”²⁰. For humans, this communication of a cosmic theology remains somewhat mysterious, and yet the Psalm gives witness of these “unhearable words” (Ps 19:3). As Joerstad comments: “The poets of the Psalter have practiced and trained their ears and eyes to observe the worship of nonhuman beings.”²¹ One might conclude, therefore, that the psalm invites its readers to listen to creation in order to learn from its silent proclamation of God’s glory and finally to join the fellow creatures in this constant praise of the Creator.

In difference to Ps 19, Ps 29 is not about God’s “instruction” (Ps 19:8), but about creation’s response to the appearance of the divine “glory” (29:3; cf. 19:2). For it is this glory of God that manifests itself in the thunderstorm pictured in the middle section of the psalm, whereby the psalmist draws the reader’s attention above all to the echo that the powerful appearance of God evokes in creation. Three parts may be distinguished in Ps 29: After the invitation to praise God has been pronounced in Heaven (vv.1–2), God’s splendor and glory manifests itself in his creation by means of a thunderstorm theophany, which, as it were, brings the cosmic echo of the heavenly liturgy to life (vv.3–9a). This echo is in turn taken up by the earthly liturgy in the temple, where God’s power—experienced in the thunderstorm—is praised as bringing blessing and peace (vv.9b–11), for the storm coming up from the sea brings the rain longed for throughout the dry season, and (restores) fertility to the land. In other words, in the first two verses, the psalm depicts a heavenly liturgy to which the “sons of the gods” are invited. At the end, in vv. 9–11, this liturgy comes to life, as it were, as the exclamation “Glory!” (v.9) echoes the call in v.1 to give God “glory and power”. However, the setting has changed since the beginning of the psalm, because the “palace” mentioned in v.9 is no longer the heavenly realms, but the Jerusalem temple, as can be deduced from the double mention of God’s people in v.11. The call to praise God issued in God’s heavenly dwelling place (vv.1–2) is thus mirrored in the conclusion of the psalm (vv.9b–11) through the liturgical performance in

19 Alexandra Grund, *“Die Himmel erzählen die Herrlichkeit Gottes“: Psalm 19 im Kontext der nachexilischen Toraweisheit* (Neukirchener, 2004), 341 (my translation).

20 Mari Joerstad, *The Hebrew Bible and Environmental Ethics: Humans, Nonhumans, and the Living Landscape* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 168.

21 Joerstad, *Hebrew Bible*, 170.



the temple on Zion, the earthly dwelling place of YHWH. Between the two palaces of God in Heaven and on Mount Zion lies, cosmographically and textually, the atmosphere in which the “voice of YHWH” resounds sevenfold (vv.3–9a). The Psalm thus recounts a cosmic liturgy, which, after being intoned in heaven, takes place in the thunderstorm theophany, until finally the earthly liturgy binds it back to the heavenly one in order to close, in the resounding echo, the cycle of praise that has extended from heaven to earth.

A kind of descent of God’s praise from heaven to earth is discernable also in Ps 148, as its first part (vv. 1–6) describes God’s praise in heaven, the second (vv. 7–14) that on earth. What is striking in this psalm is the tenfold repetition of the imperative הללו “praise”, as it puts the human speakers in the role of arousing and orchestrating the cosmic praise of the Creator.

Finally, in Ps 150, the heavenly and the earthly sphere come together, so to speak, as the term קודש “sanctuary” in v.1 appears to be deliberately ambiguous in regard to whether God’s abode in heaven or rather the human-built temple is in view. This ambiguity might hint at the eschatological fulfilment, when the whole cosmos—Heaven and Earth—will become God’s sanctuary and the whole of creation will unite in praise of God. In this perspective, it seems plausible that the term כל הנשמה “all breath” in Ps 150:6 does not only include the whole of humanity, but all living beings. They all are invited to perform the praise of God in sound and speech, with music, song and dance, in representation of the entire community of creation, which expresses the praise of its Creator through its existence. The particular role of humans is represented in Ps 150 by the psalmist himself, who calls upon the whole cosmos to sing praise as the conductor, as it were, of the cosmic orchestra that unites heaven and earth.

The Perspective of Orthodox Theology (John Zizioulas)

Amongst present-day orthodox theology, the understanding of humans as priests of creation has been taken up most prominently by John Zizioulas.²² Building on the anthropology of Maximus Confessor and his

22 Regarding Zizioulas’ publications on the topic see the literature listed above note 5. His ecotheological anthropology is part of an intense work and thinking on ecological matters in Orthodox theology, c.f. Elizabeth Theokritoff, *Living in God’s Creation: Orthodox Perspectives on Ecology* (St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2009); Bruce V. Foltz and John Chryssavgis, eds., *Toward an Ecology of Transfiguration: Orthodox Christian Perspectives on Environment, Nature, and Creation* (Fordham University Press, 2013).



view of man as a microcosm in which all the elements of creation are bundled together and reflected,²³ he sees humans elevated to the status of mediators between God and his creatures. By overcoming the self-centredness in which man has become entangled in since the fall into sin, by virtue of the Holy Spirit and, as *homo eucharisticus*, by offering the whole world gratefully to the Creator in the liturgy and expressing his gratitude and appreciation in everyday life through ascetic frugality (“I only take what I need”), man finds his natural destiny as a priest of creation.²⁴

Accordingly, it is in the liturgy that man’s vocation as a priest of creation finds its most intense form of expression, because it represents the “most positive and active acceptance of the world and creation”.²⁵ The celebration of the liturgy therefore does not mean turning away from the world, but rather turning intimately towards the world. In the liturgical celebration, a Eucharistic vision of the world is revealed to humans: They perceive the world for what it is, namely a gift from the Creator, and among all creatures they are the actual recipients. It is therefore up to humans to offer thanksgiving to the “Giver of all good” (cf. Jas 1:17). As priests of creation, humans does this on behalf of all (silent) creatures (cf. Ps 19:3: “Their voice is not heard”), but also together with all creatures who join him in praising God (cf. Ps 148; 150), and also by means of the created things, which humans symbolically present to the Creator in the Eucharistic gifts of bread and wine.²⁶

This priestly anthropology indicates an ontological and not merely functional relationship between humans and creation. Therefore, Zizioulas does not outline an ecological ethic that draws up norms of behaviour, but rather an ethos rooted in a religious culture and community, which is embedded in a liturgical, spiritual and ethical practice and is articulated therein. Three aspects of a Christian-ecological ethos can be distinguished:²⁷

- The liturgical ethos aims at the sanctification of the world and draws on a Eucharistic vision in which matter appears as designed for holiness and as a means to sanctification.

23 Cf. Lars Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator: The Theological Anthropology of Maximus the Confessor* (Open Court, 1995), 137–40.

24 Cf. John Zizioulas, “Creation Theology: An Orthodox Perspective”, in Chryssavgis and Asproulis, *Priests of Creation*, 38–51.

25 John Zizioulas, “The Eucharistic Vision of the World,” in Chryssavgis and Asproulis, *Priests of Creation*, 133–43, 135.

26 Cf. Zizioulas, “Eucharistic Vision,” 133–43.

27 John Zizioulas, “Toward an Environmental Ethic,” in Chryssavgis and Asproulis, *Priests of Creation*, 160–71.



- The iconographic ethos recognises the transparency of creation towards the divine presence in the entire cosmos and strives for an aesthetic that expresses this transparency.
- Finally, the ascetic ethos focuses on self-limitation and renunciation in order to practise an attitude of appreciation and gratitude through fasting.

The relationship of humans to the other parts of creation therefore does not remain external in the sense of a responsibility towards their fellow creatures as their guardians or stewards, but is internal, as it is the destiny of humans to sanctify the world through and together with all creatures. As priests of creation, human beings give, within the limits of space and time, all created things a share in God's eternity.²⁸

Conclusion

The Anthropocene crisis calls for an anthropological reorientation in order to overcome the reductionist tendencies of modernity that tend to narrow down reason to rationalism, relationality to individualism and ethos to ethics. In this brief study, I hope to have shown that the understanding of humans as priests of creation which is rooted in the Old Testament and has been taken up and deepened in present-day Orthodox theology addresses this need as it may reveal itself as a core point within an ecotheological anthropology.

Regarding the writings of the Old Testament, the priestly role of man appears on a metaphorical lever in the Eden narrative (Gen 2–3) as his task to “till” and “keep” the garden may be understood as allusion to his mediatory role between God and the creation by “serving” God and “observing” his instruction in the sanctuary which is the entire world. The same mediatory role of humans is discernable also in the Psalter: Humans may witness and learn from the silent praise of their fellow creatures (Ps 19) in order to echo on earth the heavenly proclamation of God's glory (Ps 29) and finally incite and animate the cosmic praise of the Creator that unites heaven and earth (Ps 148 and 150). The Orthodox understanding of humans as priests of creation, echoes and amplifies these perspectives of the Old Testament: As *homo eucharisticus*, man passes on God's work of salvation to all fellow creatures, by collecting the gratitude

28 Cf. John Zizioulas, “A Theological Approach to the Ecological Problem,” in Chryssavgis and Asproulis, *Priests of Creation*, 55–60.



of all beings and offering it up to the Creator on their behalf. As John Zizioulas points out in his writings, this anthropology is concretized in threefold liturgical, iconographic and ascetic collective practice which is informed by tradition.

Finally, the notion of humans as priests of creation runs against misanthropic tendencies within the ecological movement. Understanding the mediatory role of humans between God and creation makes clear that we are not bound to act as a danger for the life of our planet, but may hope to reveal ourselves as humble servants for the reunification (*theosis*) of the community of beings with their Creator.

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