

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: INSIGHTS FROM AN EASTERN ORTHODOX THEOLOGY OF CREATION

This article explores the elements of Orthodox tradition that could inspire a vision of sustainable development. Particular attention is offered to the theology of creation and its connection with anthropology as a valuable guide for sustainable development and the environmental crisis. The Orthodox theology of creation in connection with anthropology offers several models of a healthy and sustainable interaction between the world and the human person. All these theological models emerge from a Christian ethos that (i) seeks development without the destruction of nature for utilitarian and egoistic purposes, (ii) sees the sustainable development of creation in the promotion of the idea that the whole world – humans and nature alike – is a gift to be creatively returned to God rather than an object to be limitlessly exploited and consumed; and (iii) speaks of the flourishing of the human person as inseparable from communion with other human beings and from the flourishing of the whole of creation.

Keywords: Orthodox Christianity, sustainable development, theology of creation, asceticism, deification.

Our contemporary world is confronted with a series of unprecedented crises such as war, pandemic, natural catastrophes, climate change, and devastating poverty, with tremendous consequences for human beings and the whole of creation. The challenges posed by such crises demand urgent responses from various political, social, and religious actors to eradicate poverty, save the world we all inhabit from the damage caused to the environment, and promote peace, stability, justice, and prosperity. The United Nations' principle of sustainable development is a response to the growing crises that societies are currently facing. Sustainable development and its action plan (2015-2030)¹, drawn from the 1987 Brundtland Report, call for immediate action to implement social, economic, and ecological

¹ The seventeen Sustainable Developments Goals (SDGs) form the core of the 2030 Agenda. See <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/> (accessed on May 12, 2022).

transformation. What stands at the heart of sustainable development is the vision that countries around the world should promote economic, social, and political development actions that “meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”². While embracing economic development and progress, sustainable development also promotes care for the environment, equality, and justice. In other words, what sustainable development proposes is the achievement of a right balance between three main pillars: economic growth and prosperity; social inclusion; and environmental protection. The practice of common discernment structures the vision behind sustainable development, as its implementation requires reflection and active contribution from all actors involved, churches included.

What could be the contribution of the Orthodox Church to the implementation of sustainable development? To explore all the elements of Orthodox tradition that could inspire and support the principle of sustainable development goes beyond the ambition of this article. It has a more limited scope: to offer some general remarks on the Orthodox theology of creation in connection with anthropology as a valuable guide for sustainable development and the environmental crisis it must overcome. Even though this chapter cannot do justice to the richness of Eastern Christianity and to the multifaceted theological contribution it can make to the vision behind sustainable development, it covers an essential pillar of this organizing principle that aims to accelerate the transition to a sustainable world: protection of the environment.³ The Orthodox theology of creation

² The Brundtland Report, also known under the title *Our Common Future*, was published in October 1987 by the United Nations. See *Our Common Future: Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development* / ed. G. Harlem Brundtland et al. Oxford 1987. The report is available at sustainabledevelopment.un.org. The quotation in the article comes from §27. There is an extensive list of secondary literature on the concept of sustainable development from a theological perspective. See, especially, *Sustainable Development Goals and the Catholic Church: Catholic Social Teaching and the UN's Agenda 2030* / ed. K. Cichos et al. New York 2021. For an Orthodox Christian approach, see V. Votrin. *The Orthodoxy and Sustainable Development: A Potential for Broader Involvement of the Orthodox Churches in Ethiopia and Russia // Environment, Development, and Sustainability* 7/1 (2005) 9-21.

³ The ecological crisis and environmental protection are issues extensively discussed by contemporary Orthodox theologians and scholars. See the following books: *The Orthodox Church Addresses the Climate Crisis* / ed. Th. Nantsou & N. Asproulis. Athens – Volos 2021; *Priests of Creation: John Zizioulas on Discerning an Ecological Ethos* / ed. J. Chryssavgis, N. Asproulis. London 2021; J. Chryssavgis. *Creation as Sacrament: Reflections on Ecology and Spirituality*. London 2019; J.-C. Larchet. *Les fondements spirituels de la crise écologique*. Genève 2018; *Toward an Ecology of Transfiguration: Orthodox Perspectives on Environment, Nature, and Creation* / ed. J. Chryssavgis, B. V. Foltz. New York 2013; *On Earth as in Heaven: Ecological Vision and Initiatives of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew* / ed. J. Chryssavgis. New York 2011; E. Theokritoff. *Living God's Creation: Orthodox Perspectives on Ecology*. New York 2009; Kallistos Ware. *Ecological Crisis, Ecological Hope: Our Orthodox Vision of Creation*. New York 2006; *Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation: Insights from Orthodoxy* / ed. G. Limouris. Geneva 1990; P. Sherrard. *The Eclipse of Man and Nature*. Northumberland 1987. See,

in connection with anthropology offers at least three main models of sustainable interaction between the human person and the world. These three models emerge from a Christian ethos that (i) embraces development without damaging nature and environment in the pursuit of egocentric and individualistic goals (the ascetic model); (ii) approaches development considering the idea that the world is a gift to be gratefully returned to its Creator rather than an object to be exploited with greed and carelessness (the Eucharistic model); and (iii) speaks of the flourishing of the human person as intimately linked with the flourishing of other human persons and the whole of creation (the co-dependence model).

The Ascetic Model

Asceticism is a common characteristic of many religions around the world⁴ and Christianity is not alone in being defined by such a spiritual practice. However, asceticism⁵ stands at the heart of Orthodox Christianity as one of the guiding principles of its spirituality. As Dumitru Stăniloae emphasizes, in Orthodox theology the process of spiritual perfection involves two simultaneous, interconnected, and transformative stages: (i) *asceticism* – the efforts of the human person, sustained by grace, towards purification from sinful passions, embracement of a virtuous life, and the normalization of the relationship with God and the rest of creation; and (ii) *mysticism* – the union of the human person with God by grace; the culminating stage of the spiritual life, which means complete openness and receptivity to God's life-giving grace.⁶ A Russian Orthodox theologian from

also, the following articles: A. Louth. Between Creation and Transfiguration: The Environment in the Eastern Orthodox Tradition // *Ecological Hermeneutics: Biblical, Historical, and Theological Perspectives* / ed. D. G. Horell et al. Edinburgh 2012, pp. 211-222; R. Bordeianu. Maximus and Ecology: The Relevance of Maximus the Confessor's Theology of Creation for the Present Ecological Crisis // *Downside Review* 127 (2009) 103-126.

⁴ See, for example, M. Bonner. Asceticism and Poverty in the Qu'ran // *Numen: International Review for the History of Religions* 66/5-6 (2019) 524-549; L. M. Wills. Ascetic Theology Before Asceticism? Jewish Narratives and the Decentering of the Self // *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74/4 (2006) 902-925; *Asceticism and Its Critics: Historical Accounts and Comparative Perspectives* / ed. O. Freiberger. Oxford 2006; M. G. Wiltshire. *Ascetic Figures Before and in Early Buddhism: The Emergence of Gautama as the Buddha*. Berlin 1990.

⁵ For an introduction into the history and theology of Christian asceticism, see A. Crislip. Asceticism // *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology* / ed. I. A. McFarland et al. Cambridge 2011, pp. 37-38; *Asceticism* / ed. V.L. Wimbush, R. Valantasis. Oxford 1998; Ch. A. Bernard, T. Goffi. Ascèse // *Dictionnaire de la vie spirituelle* / ed. S. de Fiores, T. Goffi. Paris 1983, pp. 56-69; O. Clément. *Sources. Les mystiques chrétiens des origines. Textes et commentaires*. Paris 1982; T. Špidlík. *La spiritualité de l'Orient chrétien*. Roma 1978; J. de Guibert, A. Willwoll. Ascèse, ascétisme // *Dictionnaire de spiritualité ascétique et mystique* / ed. Marcel Viller, vol. 1. Paris 1937, pp. 936-1017.

⁶ D. Stăniloae. *Ascetica și mistica Bisericii Ortodoxe*. București 2002, pp. 5-15; English translation: Dumitru Stăniloae. *Orthodox Spirituality: A Practical Guide for the Faithful and a Definitive Manual for the Scholar* / tr. J. Newville, O. Kloos. South Canaan 2003, pp. 21-29.

the Parisian diaspora, Paul Evdokimov, defined asceticism as a practice of self-discipline which heals the effects of the Fall and inaugurates a new relationship of the human person with the material creation: “[t]he word ‘asceticism’ comes from the Greek *askesis* and means exercise, effort, exploit. One can speak of athletic asceticism when it seeks to render the body supple, obedient, resistant to every obstacle... Christian asceticism protects the spirit from being held captive by the world”⁷.

Even though the ethos of asceticism, which implies a certain holding back from the world, might look to many people as a denial of the material creation and its values, it has nothing to do with the rejection or depreciation of God’s creation. Asceticism is world-affirming rather than world-denying,⁸ especially because it leads to a spiritual transformation of the human person so that he/she can approach the rest of creation and fellow humans in a totally new way, which is no longer driven by passions such as greed, egocentricity, and self-interest. Genuine asceticism has nothing to do with a Gnostic or Manichean rejection of the world and longing to escape materiality, although it is true that Christianity has also witnessed the emergence of distorted forms of ascetic practices throughout its history. Authentic asceticism is the education of the human person to engage the world and its achievements with self-discipline and moderation to preserve the freedom of the human person and avoid his/her enslavement by uncontrolled exterior forces; yet, as Sergius Bulgakov highlighted, “no domain of life is condemned or abolished”⁹. Asceticism is, therefore, liberation from an excessive, destructive, and selfish attachment to this world, which confuses the creation with an unlimited reservoir of resources and riches to satisfy individual pleasures and desires. Asceticism is world-affirming precisely because it defends the right of creation not to be reduced to “whatever functions we are determined it should perform for our benefit” or to “passive objects to be desired... by an individual appetite”¹⁰.

⁷ Paul Evdokimov. *Les âges de la vie spirituelle: Des Pères du désert à nos jours*. Paris 1964, pp. 146-147. The English translation of this work has been offered by Sister Gertrude, S.P., Michael Plekon, Alexis Vinogradov: Paul Evdokimov. *Ages of the Spiritual Life*. New York 2002, pp. 159-160.

⁸ See, for example, the excellent analysis of the world-affirming aspect of asceticism by Kallistos Ware: *idem*. *The Way of the Ascetics: Negative or Affirmative? // Asceticism* / ed. V. L. Wimbush, R., Valantasis. Oxford 1998, pp. 3-15; P. Florensky. *The Pillar and the Ground of the Truth: An Essay in Orthodox Theodicy in Twelve Letters* / tr. B. Jakim. Princeton 1997, pp. 211-213.

⁹ S. Bulgakov. *The Orthodox Church* / tr. L. Kesich. New York 1988, p. 154.

¹⁰ Rowan Williams. *Looking East in Winter: Contemporary Thought and the Eastern Christian Tradition*. London 2021, pp. 66-67. Mother Maria Skobtsova’s principle of non-possession is the perfect exemplification of a world-affirming spirituality which does not seek to dominate creation but to embrace it with love by renouncing the vice of greed and the accumulation of material riches. See Mother Maria Skobtsova. *Essential Writings* / tr. R. Pevear, L. Volokhonsky. New York 2003, pp. 104-106.

What is the relevance of the ascetic model for sustainable development and its emphasis on care for the environment? What the Orthodox tradition of asceticism could offer to the project of sustainable development is the spirit of self-restraint, sacrifice, and moderation that must structure economic and social interactions, as well as a human approach to creation¹¹. It is only by this spirit of moderation that a more sustainable future is possible for all of us and for coming generations. Asceticism is a reminder that the world is not a place to be arrogantly and stubbornly exploited, devoured, and conquered, but the home of all human and non-human beings to be carefully preserved and transformed into a hospitable and friendly place. In other words, Orthodox asceticism encourages the human person to control his/her sinful impulses to approach creation with greed, selfishness, obsession of power, and material accumulation. Therefore, asceticism can rightly be considered as the most ecological, social, and justice-oriented manifestation of Christianity. As John Zizioulas points out, asceticism is about the

human will and its liberation from selfishness and from unnecessary needs created by the consumerist society of developed economies. By reducing human needs to their essentials, asceticism protects the natural environment from human greed. At the same time, it allows more people to share in the natural resources and contributes to justice in human societies.¹²

Since asceticism is world-affirming rather than world-denying, it would be misleading to claim that it opposes the enjoyment of life, development, and growth. Ascetic practices affirm progress, either economic, social, or cultural, but are at odds with a world that is becoming more and more governed by the spirit of quantitative development and the accumulation of material goods. As a viable alternative to the quantitative model of development and progress, which creates economic inequalities and leads to ecological crises, the Orthodox ethos

¹¹ Asceticism is a principle or a practice but not a goal. The final goal of asceticism is the salvation of the human person and his/her union with God, which implies a non-sinful approach to creation and fellow humans. See M. Lot-Borodine. *La déification de l'homme selon la doctrine des Pères grecs*. Paris 1970, p. 100. Moreover, since asceticism is a struggle “against the sinful and fallen aspect of the self”, it “is clearly something that is required from *all* Christians, and not only from those under monastic vows” – Kallistos Ware. *The Orthodox Way*. London – Oxford 1979, p. 79. See, also, P. Evdokimov. *Orthodoxy* / tr. J. Hummerstone, C. Slipper. London 2011, pp. 106-115. Evdokimov’s book, which is a detailed introduction into Orthodox theology and its spirituality, was first published in French in 1979.

¹² John Zizioulas. *Creation Theology: An Orthodox Perspective // Priests of Creation: John Zizioulas on Discerning an Ecological Ethos* / ed. John Chryssavgis & Nikolaos Asproulis. London 2021, p. 50. Kallistos Ware points out that by observing Lent, which is one of the many ascetic practices of Eastern Christianity, Orthodox Christians move away from a life based on what they egoistically want to a way of life based on what they need. See Kallistos Ware. *Lent and the Consumer Society // Living Orthodoxy in the Modern World: Orthodox Christianity and Society* / ed. A. Walker, C. Carras. New York 2000, p. 84.

of asceticism proposes a model of qualitative development which, as Donella Meadows pointed out, does not imply zero growth, progress, or prosperity¹³. Qualitative development is a form of sustainable progress that discerns and prioritizes patterns of growth that do not transform the world into a socially unjust, economically unequal, and environmentally unfriendly place. Asceticism generates a positive attitude towards development on the condition that it does not represent an invitation to destructive behavior towards creation, indifference to the degradation of the material world, inequalities in the level of human well-being, and unhealthy human competition for resources and benefits. This is to say that asceticism embraces a development which places emphatic stress on the right, qualitative, and responsible use of material things¹⁴ as a recognition of the fact that the entire creation is God's gift for everyone's spiritual and physical well-being, and not just for a few privileged countries or social groups. In view of this, an asceticism that supports qualitative and responsible development has nothing to do with individual self-improvement or egocentric progress. Asceticism that prioritizes qualitative development "is profoundly communal: it has to do with how we use gifts bestowed for the benefit of all"¹⁵. Therefore, the vision of sustainable development which asceticism endorses is in fact communal development, which means development that is relational and has a future for all¹⁶.

The Eucharistic Model

The Eucharistic model is the second major Orthodox Christian pattern of interaction between the human person and the rest of creation that could enrich the vision of sustainable development. The Eucharistic model sheds light upon two intimately linked images of creation: creation as a gift to be gratefully returned to God and creation as a sacramental reality, which means that material reality is a vehicle of God's love and grace.

At the heart of the entire Orthodox cosmology lies the idea that the world as God's gift is what most deeply and basically defines created existence. The implications of this theological claim are multiple. *Firstly*, the world is understood as the place and medium of the encounter between the Giver and the recipient of the gift. As Rowan Williams pointed out, in Eastern Christianity "creation is itself

¹³ Donella Meadows, Dennis Meadows. *Limits to Growth: The 30-Year Update*. London 2004, p. 255.

¹⁴ Theokritoff. *Living God's Creation*, pp. 104-112.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

¹⁶ Rowan Williams speaks of sustainable development in connection with sustainable communities. See *idem*. *Faith in the Public Square*. London 2012, pp. 235-242. This short chapter is based on a lecture given by Rowan Williams at the New Neighborhoods Conference on March 16, 2005, in Chatham, Kent.

an act of communication, a form of language... Creation itself is an act of divine self-giving, the bestowing of God's activity in and through what is not God. In other words, despite sin, corruption, and death, the world in all its diversity stands in front of us as a revelation of the Creator's beauty, love, and generosity, and as a means of receiving something of the life of God¹⁷. For this reason, any interaction with the world should lead to a relationship with God and the celebration of God's manifestation in and through creation. *Secondly*, if the whole of creation is a gift from God, its final vocation is to be returned to God in thankfulness and praise. There is a circular movement that defines or should define the triangle God-creation-humanity: this movement starts with God, who entrusts the world to humankind as a gift; human beings receive the gift with gratitude and return it to God. The gift is returned to God not as it was initially given but transformed by human creativity and imagination¹⁸. It is precisely the Eucharistic ethos that transpires in this circular movement of the world as a gift. *Thirdly*, the world is God's gift to all of us. It is not an object that should create antagonism and competition between people, classes, and nations, which very easily leads to injustice, tensions, and war, but a common gift to be shared and given in love rather than possessed or exploited for egoistic objectives. This is to say that nature and the entire cosmos, with all their riches and resources, are not property which human beings can rule over at will. Creation is ultimately a gift to all of us. It traces its source of existence to and is ultimately dependent upon someone who is infinitely higher than all of us.

The sacramentality of creation relates to the theme of the world as God's gift to humanity. Even though Orthodox theology refers to the seven sacraments of the Church as channels of God's sanctifying grace, there is a long tradition in Eastern Christianity to speak of the whole of creation as a sacrament in a larger sense of the word: a vehicle of God's loving grace. As Dumitru Stăniloae pointed out, everything that exists can be regarded as the most comprehensive sacrament

¹⁷ Williams. *Faith in the Public Square*, chapter 14, p. 177. Dumitru Stăniloae writes that "[t]hrough the world as a gift and word, God maintains a dialogue with men, which is neither static nor merely a repetition, but a way by which mankind is led towards its goal, union with God" – D. Stăniloae. *Orthodoxy and the World // Sobornost* 6/5 (1972) 298. In Greek patristics, Maximus the Confessor's theology of divine *logoi* explores God's presence in the world, showing that everything exists as God's spoken word to us. Maximus the Confessor. *Ambigua* (see PG 91); English translation: Maximus the Confessor. *On Difficulties in the Church Fathers: The Ambigua*, vol. 1-2 / tr. N. Constat. Cambridge 2014.

¹⁸ D. Stăniloae. *Teologia dogmatică ortodoxă*, vol. 1, 3rd ed. București 2003, pp. 354-360; English translation: *The Experience of God: Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, vol. 2: *The World: Creation and Deification* / tr. I. Ionita, R. Barringer. Brookline 2000, pp. 21-27. Also, Ch. Miller. *The Gift of the World: An Introduction to the Theology of Dumitru Stăniloae*. Edinburgh 2000, pp. 58-64; and V. Coman. Dumitru Stăniloae's Theology of the World: Reflections on the Margins of the Relationship between Humankind and Creation // *Communio Viatorum* 59/2 (2017) 189-209, pp. 198-201.

or mystery: “[t]he cosmos is a mystery; the world around us is a mystery; my own person is a mystery and my fellow human beings are a mystery”¹⁹. Such a claim is based on the conviction that divine glory is “present everywhere and tangible in all”²⁰ that exists, despite the brokenness of the world around, despite the suffering of God’s creation. Said differently, the sacramentality of creation is the affirmation of “the manifestation and revelation of the heavenly in the earthly”²¹. It is the vocation of human beings to reveal the sacramental beauty of creation and accelerate its movement towards cosmic transfiguration and deification: the complete spiritualization of the whole of creation, while keeping its ontological status. In Orthodox iconography, the Byzantine representation of Pentecost (also called the Descent of the Holy Spirit) teaches us that the destiny of the entire cosmos is to be transfigured by God’s uncreated energies. In the center of the icon, below the Apostles, a royal figure is represented. The old king is a symbol of the cosmos, which is called to transfiguration. The wide-open arms of the royal figure shows that the entire cosmos is also ready for the descent of the Holy Spirit²².

The relevance of the Eucharistic model for sustainable development is manifold. The world as a gift and sacrament indicates that, when freed from our egoistic and sinful struggle to possess and dominate the rest of creation, the human person has the capacity and vocation to interact with the world in a totally new

¹⁹ D. Stăniloae. *The Mystery of the Church // Church, Kingdom, World: The Church as Mystery and Prophetic Sign* / ed. G. Limouris. Geneva 1986, p. 50. Also, P. Evdokimov. *Nature // Scottish Journal of Theology* 18 (1965) 1-22. Evdokimov speaks of all creation as “secretly sacramental” and “as a conductor of divine grace, the vehicle of divine energies”.

²⁰ Chryssavgis. *Creation as Sacrament*, p. 99.

²¹ *Ibid.* In Roman Catholic theology, the theme of the world’s sacramentality has become a subject of intense reflection in the post-Vatican II period. The sacramental nature of creation has been appropriated by an important number of Roman Catholic theologians such as Edward Schillebeeckx, Karl Rahner, Louis-Marie Chauvet, Leonardo Boff, and Kevin Irwin. The name of David Brown (b. 1948) should be placed at the top of the list of Anglican theologians who address the question of the world as sacrament. The development of the theme of creation’s sacramental nature among Roman Catholic and Anglican thinkers sprung out of modern and contemporary Western theology’s need to overcome the sacred-profane dichotomy of the post-Enlightenment deistic vision of the world and acknowledge that there is “a likeness-in-the-very-difference between that which sanctifies (God) and that which is sanctified (creation), between uncreated and created” – John Chryssavgis. *The World as Sacrament: Insights into an Orthodox Worldview // Pacifica* 10/1 (1997) 1. The extension of the sacramental meaning beyond the liturgical and sacramental celebration had wider implications for Western theologians’ engagement with the realities of the world and their ethical commitment to society (liberation theology, eco-theology, etc.). See V. Coman. *The Sacramentality of the Church in Dumitru Stăniloae’s Theology // Pro Ecclesia* 27/2 (2018) 203-224.

²² For a detailed introduction into the interpretation of the icon of Pentecost, see P. Evdokimov. *L’art de l’icône: théologie de la beauté*. Bruges 1972, pp. 283-291. See, also, a book on icons by Russian theologians from the Parisian diaspora: L. Ouspensky, V. Lossky. *The Meaning of Icons* / tr. G. E. H. Palmer, E. Kadloubovsky. New York 1982, pp. 207-208.

way: as a steward, guardian, and priest of creation²³ who imprints the gift with a human creative vision and refers it back to God. Alexander Schmemmann does not hesitate to state that what lies at the center of original sin is the human being's rejection of the sacerdotal or priestly vocation in relation to God and the created world, which means the adoption of an exploiter's mentality and the refusal to treat creation as a gift.²⁴ When the world is understood as a gift and sacrament, nature or creation is not simply raw material whose use is limitless regardless of the consequences. Nature is not simply a source of exploitation "to produce goods, gain profit, and achieve economic growth"²⁵; it is also a sacred reality, a palpable mystery of God's presence, whose beauty and harmony point towards the loving Creator.

The understanding of creation as a gift and sacrament does not exclude development and the transformation of the world. However, this development treats the world as a gift and sacrament in all its aspects and manifestations. Therefore, it is not social, economic, cultural, and political development, which damages creation and perpetuates its rapacious exploitation by human beings; on the contrary, it is a reconciliatory form of development, which considers and promotes the well-being of both creation and human beings. Furthermore, it is a development that persuades people to treat creation with respect

²³ Metropolitan John (Zizioulas) of Pergamon claims that the notion of a steward of creation has its own limitations. It involves a managerial approach to creation. Furthermore, it suggests a more conservationist interaction with the world. This explains why, for Zizioulas, the notion of a priest of creation describes much better the relationship between the human person and the rest of creation. According to Zizioulas, "such a model seems to emerge naturally from the patristic and liturgical tradition of the Orthodox Church, but its existential meaning is universal" – John Zizioulas. Proprietors or Priests of Creation? // *Priests of Creation*, pp. 144-153, especially 145-146. Also, E. Theokritoff. Creator and creation // *The Cambridge Companion of Orthodox Christian Theology* / ed. M. B. Cunningham, E. Theokritoff. Cambridge 2008, p. 74; Theokritoff. *Living in God's Creation*, pp. 212-225. See, also, Stăniloae's approach to this theological notion in an article published by Radu Bordeianu, an Orthodox theologian from the United States: R. Bordeianu. Priesthood Natural, Universal, and Ordained: Dumitru Stăniloae's Communion Ecclesiology // *Pro Ecclesia* 19 (2010) 405-433. Stăniloae's theology of creation is influenced by Maximus the Confessor.

²⁴ A. Schmemmann. *Of Water and the Spirit: A Liturgical Study of Baptism*. New York 1974, p. 96.

²⁵ John Zizioulas. A Theological Approach to the Ecological Problem // *Priests of Creation*, p. 62. As the document *For the Life of the World: Towards a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church* points out, "[n]one of us exists in isolation from the whole of humanity, or from the totality of creation. We are dependent creatures, creatures ever in communion, and hence we are also morally responsible not only for ourselves or for those whom we immediately influence or affect, but for the whole of the created order – the whole city of the cosmos, so to speak. In our own time, especially, we must understand that serving our neighbor and preserving the natural environment are intimately and inseparably connected. There is a close and indissoluble bond between our care of creation and our service to the body of Christ, just as there is between the economic conditions of the poor and the ecological conditions of the planet" (§76). This document, issued by the Ecumenical Patriarchate in the Spring of 2020, is available online (www.goarch.org/).

and thanksgiving, acknowledging the fact that the survival of the gift means the survival of the recipients of the gift and their future generations. This leads to a third and final model of the interaction between human beings and creation: the model of solidarity, communion, and co-dependence.

The Co-Dependence Model

Orthodox theology puts special emphasis on the co-dependence between human-kind and the rest of creation in the sense that human flourishing/*theosis* cannot happen independently from the flourishing/*theosis* of creation and *vice versa*²⁶. There is no way in which human beings can dissociate themselves from the rest of creation. They cannot exist in a state of autonomy, independent of the rest of creation. Therefore, the relationship between the human being and creation is one of mutual need, solidarity, and interdependence²⁷.

On the one hand, Orthodox theology claims that the human being is the pinnacle of creation²⁸, as every human is made in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26-27). This should not give human beings a superiority complex or the right to abuse creation. On the contrary, the creation of human beings as the highest form of existence on earth involves special care and responsibility towards the rest of God's creation. Moreover, the emphasis of Orthodox theology on humankind as the pinnacle of creation means that the world cannot fulfil its purpose apart from the human being. As a mediator²⁹ between the spiritual

²⁶ It is in Stăniloae's theology that the interdependence between the human person and the rest of creation is most clearly articulated. For Stăniloae, whose theology draws heavily on Greek Patristic insights, neither of the two can function and be saved without the other. He is quite critical of any Christian tendency to understand the salvation of the human person separate from the salvation of the rest of creation. See Stăniloae. *Teologia dogmatică ortodoxă*, vol. 1, p. 337; *The Experience of God*, vol. 2, pp. 1-2. See, also, Daniel Neeser's analysis of Stăniloae's theology of the interdependence between the human person and the rest of creation in the article: D. Neeser. The World: Gift of God and Scene of Humanity's Response // *The Ecumenical Review* 33/3 (1981) 272-282.

²⁷ Miller. *The Gift of the World*, pp. 56-57. Drawing on Stăniloae's reflections on the relationship between the human person and the rest of creation, in his book Charles Miller speaks of "our solidarity with the creation". This solidarity between humans and creation involves interdependence and reciprocal need.

²⁸ It is true that the understanding of the notion of the human being as the pinnacle of creation can lead to an arrogant attitude towards nature. In fact, this is what American historian Lynn White claimed in his famous article: L. White. The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis // *Science* 155 (1967) 1203-1207. However, the Christian meaning of this notion does not imply an unreasonable use of creation by humankind.

²⁹ For a detailed analysis of the human being's role of mediator between God and creation in Greek Patristics, especially in Maximus the Confessor's theology, see the following works by Lars Thunberg: *Microcosmos and Mediator: The Theological Anthropology of Maximus the Confessor*. Lund 1965; *Man and the Cosmos: The Vision of St Maximus the Confessor*. New York 1985.

and the material, the human being has a chief part to play in the flourishing and spiritual transfiguration of the world. As Zizioulas highlights, the human being has the ability to give elevated meaning to and bring into communion with God “things otherwise subject to decay and the passage of time”³⁰. It is the human being who brings to fruition the potentialities implanted by God in creation, deciphering the many ways in which, through scientific discoveries and cultural achievements, the various components of nature can be reshaped and enhanced by human creativity and imagination, and finally brought into communion with God the Creator.

On the other hand, the human being is portrayed by Orthodox theology as a “microcosmos” (ὁ μικρὸς κόσμος)³¹, which refers to each person as a world in miniature. The human being is the reality in which the entire created world is summed up: the material and the noetic or spiritual. The fact that there is a structural similarity between the human being and the cosmos as a whole shows that the survival of each person is directly tied with the survival of the material world. The human dependence on nature is so strong that nature is seen as part of the constitution of the human being, “a source of its existence and integral development on earth”³². Therefore, humankind and the material world are so intimately connected that the protection of the environment from harm is the *sine qua non* condition for the security and survival of the human being. In other words, one can say that care for the environment is an essential dimension of anthropological care and *vice versa*. Therefore, the relationship between the human being and the rest of creation is not a one-way street in which only one party benefits and has influence over the other. On the contrary, humanity is as much dependent upon the rest of the material world as the material world is dependent upon human beings to fulfil its purpose. In Rowan Williams’ own words, “humanity and its material context are made so that they may find fulfillment in their relationship. Without each other they are not themselves”³³. It is not only the development and survival of the material constitution of the human being that are dependent on the world around; the rest of creation is also a source of spiritual growth for the human being. This is because the material world, as a sacrament in the large sense of the word, “can be the medium through which

³⁰ Zizioulas. *A Theological Approach to the Ecological Problem*, p. 86.

³¹ Maximus the Confessor. *Epistula 6* // PG 91:429D. See, also, the two excellent monographs by Thunberg on Maximus’ anthropology and cosmology: *Microcosmos and Mediator* and *Man and the Cosmos*. For a short analysis of the notion of the human person as a microcosmos, see Ware. *The Orthodox Way*, pp. 62-65. Drawing on Maximus the Confessor, the Orthodox theologian Andrew Louth speaks of the human being as the “bond of the cosmos”. See A. Louth. *Introducing Eastern Orthodox Theology*. London 2013, p. 42.

³² Stăniloae. *Teologia dogmatică ortodoxă*, vol. 1, p. 337; *The Experience of God*, vol. 2, p. 1.

³³ Williams. *Faith in the Public Square*, chapter 15, p. 194.

the believer receives divine grace”³⁴. Furthermore, the understanding of the world as God’s gift discloses its relevance for the spiritual progress of human beings. The mutuality and reciprocity that stand at the heart of this vision of the world strengthen the communion among the many receivers of the gift, as well as between them and God, who is the ultimate origin of the gift. When one considers this co-dependence between humanity and the rest of creation, it is right to say that the destiny of the human person is irrevocably tied with that of creation to the point that none of them is saved without the other; in addition, the destruction of one of them brings the destruction of the other³⁵.

The co-dependence between humanity and the whole of creation inspires the vision of sustainable development and its ecological approach, especially because it shows that the destruction of the environment or the abuse of creation, which in Orthodox theology is considered a sin against nature,³⁶ is ultimately an attack on both God’s gift and human life. In a nutshell, the degradation of the world around us endangers human existence and its well-being. As the 2020 social document *For the Life of the World* (by the Ecumenical Patriarchate) notes, “[h]uman beings are part of the intricate and delicate web of creation, and their welfare cannot be isolated from the welfare of the whole natural world”³⁷. However, “human beings all too often imagine themselves to be something separate and apart from the rest of creation, involved in the material world only insofar as they can or must exploit it for their own ends; they ignore, neglect, and even at times willfully reject their bond to the rest of creation”³⁸. The co-dependent aspect of the relationship between humankind and creation stresses the idea that human beings do not exist in a vacuum, in isolation, but are dependent on this planet and its resources for everything. Therefore, humanity cannot survive

³⁴ Stăniloae. *Teologia dogmatică ortodoxă*, vol. 1, p. 339; *The Experience of God*, vol. 2, p. 3.

³⁵ Zizioulas writes that the idea that creation cannot survive without humanity sounds strange, especially because the “natural environment has existed for so many eons without us”. Nevertheless, as Zizioulas points out, “if we regard the material creation neither statically, nor simply historically, but dynamically, theologically, and eschatologically (which also implies eternal survival), the final destiny of the material creation is united irrevocably with humanity” – John Zizioulas. *An Orthodox Response to the Environmental Challenges // Priests of Creation*, p. 84.

³⁶ To commit a crime against the natural world is a sin. For human beings to cause species to become extinct and to destroy the biological diversity of God’s creation; for human beings to degrade the integrity of the earth by causing changes in its climate, by stripping the earth of its natural forests, or destroying its wetlands; for human beings to injure other human beings with disease; for human beings to contaminate the earth’s waters, its land, its air, and its life, with poisonous substances – these are sins – Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople. Keynote Address at the Santa Barbara Symposium: California, 8.11, 1997 // Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople. *On Earth as in Heaven* / ed. J. Chryssavgis. New York 2011, p. 99.

³⁷ *For the Life of the World*, § 77.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, § 73.

the destruction of the world. The human being is an organic part of creation and does not possess the necessary resources to live outside it. For this reason, human beings have the responsibility of caring for creation and looking after the world given to them by God as a gift. Human beings must treat creation with respect and find their home within as its guardians, stewards, or priests, and not as its exploiters. This is the respect owed to creation as the source of human physical survival and flourishing: “human nature cannot treat nature as mere resources, turning it into some-thing, but must develop a dimension of love and respect towards the laws that govern its constitution. Any disturbance or upsetting of the laws of nature immediately affects the human being itself”³⁹. The worldview proposed by Orthodox theology does not go against development and societal transformation. However, the co-dependence between humanity and the rest of creation, as professed by Orthodox theology, encourages human choices and decisions driven by a sense of interdependence and mutual solidarity with the world, which means commitment to ecological conversation and a sustainable approach to creation.

Conclusions

This article has explored some of the elements of an Orthodox theology of creation that could make an important contribution to the principles underpinning the concept of sustainable development. The article focused mostly on environmental sustainability and development, shedding light on three essential models of interaction between the human being and the rest of creation that could inspire a vision of sustainable development. By way of conclusion, it is worthwhile to make a few final remarks.

The ascetical model highlighted that the right use of creation by human beings involves restraint, moderation, and self-limitation. The use of material things with detachment and discipline must not be associated with a depreciation of the goodness of creation. It is rather an affirmation of the fact that the human faculty of choice needs to be liberated from sinful greed, egoism, and self-interest. Asceticism is “a ceaseless striving against the fallen aspects of humanity and of the world... one that can reorient the human will in such a way as to restore its bond with all of creation”⁴⁰. The ecological crisis is also a spiritual crisis, which requires a radical change of our interaction with the rest of creation, a new and sustainable way of being in the world; no longer as destructive agents of God’s creation but as loving and respectful indwellers of a world that has been given to us as a gift. The ascetical ethos of Orthodox Christianity is crucial for the implementation of sustainable

³⁹ John Zizioulas. Conclusion: From Here to Where // *Priests of Creation*, p. 222.

⁴⁰ *For the Life of the World*, § 74.

development: it encourages the cultivation of a form of economic development that treats creation with respect and dignity. Moreover, the ascetical ethos promotes the adoption of a lifestyle that respects the right of future generations to inhabit the same world and enjoy its beauty and riches.

The Eucharistic model shows that the material world is not an object to be ravaged and exploited but a gift worthy to be offered back to God in praise and thankfulness. The material world is not merely the source of human physical development. The world does not simply sustain human physical life and growth; it is also a vehicle of grace and spiritualization. In the movement of human beings towards Christ, the gift of creation as a whole is returned to God, as the supreme affirmation of the vocation of the entire world to be sanctified and transfigured by the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, the whole of creation, as a gift from God, “exists not simply as ours to consume at whim or will, but rather as a realm of communion and delight, in whose goodness all persons and all creatures are meant to share, and whose beauty all persons are called to cherish and protect”⁴¹. The recognition of the world as a gift from God inspires the vision of sustainable development: the whole of creation cannot be treated as mere utility, property, or raw material. The development it inspires entails care for all creation and “the need to work to eliminate wasteful and destructive uses of natural resources, working to preserve the natural world for the present generation and for all generations to come, and practicing restraint and wise frugality in all things”⁴².

The co-dependence model claims that the flourishing of the human person is inseparable from communion with other human beings and the flourishing of the whole of creation. That being the case, the sinful ravaging of God’s creation endangers human life and harmonious co-operation between the two. The destruction of creation involves the destruction of human life. Incommensurable damage to creation means incommensurable damage to humanity and its survival on earth. The co-dependence model serves sustainable development in the sense that it raises awareness of the need “to search for a form of action that will preserve and nourish the interconnected development of humanity and its environment”⁴³.

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⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Williams. *Faith in the Public Square*, p. 188.

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**СТАЛИЙ РОЗВИТОК ІЗ ПЕРСПЕКТИВИ ПРАВОСЛАВНОГО
БОГОСЛОВ'Я СОТВОРЕННЯ**

У статті досліджено елементи православної традиції, які можуть надихнути наше розуміння сталого розвитку. Зокрема, автор фокусується на богослов'ї сотворення у взаємозв'язку з богословською антропологією, що є цінним дороговказом на шляху до сталого розвитку та для відповіді на екологічну кризу. Православне богослов'я сотворення й антропологія пропонують кілька моделей здорової і життєздатної взаємодії людської особи і навколишнього світу. Всі ці богословські моделі виникають із християнського етосу, що (а) прагне розвитку без того, щоб нищити природу в утилітарних та егоїстичних цілях, (б) сприяє сталому розвитку творіння через ідею, що весь світ – як люди, так і природа – це дар, який має у творчий спосіб бути повернутий Богові, а не об'єкт безконечної експлуатації та споживання; і (в) розглядає поняття процвітання людини в невід'ємному зв'язку з іншими людьми та процвітанням усього творіння.

Ключові слова: православне християнство, сталий розвиток, богослов'я сотворення, аскетизм, обоження