

Abstract

"Green parish" and other examples of "ecological conversion" in the Orthodox Church in Greece

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The paper discusses Orthodox environmentalism in Greece and examines the process of "greening" of the Orthodox Church there. It examines which ideals and values motivate Orthodox believers to get engaged with eco agenda, applies "lived environmentalism" approach to show how these ideals are implemented into practice, what routine everyday eco habits exist in Orthodox communities, how environmentalism is lived out in religious communities in Greece. It pays special attention to the "green parish" project run by the Greek Orthodox Church in Volos. The paper shows the differences in understanding of environmentalism among religious and secular actors. It is based on interviews and field work in Greek parishes and monasteries that are known for their ecological activities.

Eastern Orthodox Christianity is stereotypically portrayed as a religion which is far from being innovative, but rather conservative and not changing. In practice we see that Orthodox churches in different countries are responsive to the challenges of the modern days to various degrees and are shaped by the dialogue with secular society. If we take environmental topic,

the Orthodox were one of the first to react to the critique of Lynn White (1967). John Zizoulas, an Orthodox theologian, used the term “ecological conversion” and called for “a change in priorities, life-styles, modes of production and consumerism” and “ecological conversion” (Zizioulas, 1997). Later, the term gained theological and social weight in Pope Francis’ Encyclical letter from 2015 Laudato Si’.

While re-reading the lives of saints from an ecological perspective, my Orthodox informants often tell the story about St Amphiliocios (1889-1970) who was a priestmonk in Greece and lived in various places, including the island of Patmos. Long before ecology became fashionable, he assigned to people who came to him for confession that they plant a tree in penance for their sins and as an act of repentance. It is said that slowly this dry rocky island started to become green. “Whoever does not love trees, does not love God,” this phrase is ascribed to St Amphiliocios.

Planting trees as an act of repentance for sins (all types of sins, not only ‘ecological’ sins against environment which began to be seen as such very recently) is an interesting ecological ascetic practice. It teaches people that they are not the center of the universe, not the lords and proprietors of creation, not even stewards – a popular idea which, however, implies a managerial approach to nature and suggests a conservatist attitude to it. Zizoulas offers a new model, namely the “priests of creation” – humans as mediators between nature and God.

Orthodox parishes and monasteries in Greece stand in the focus of my research. They were the first to respond to ecological claims towards Christianity by revising their attitude to nature and developing the so-called “eco-theology”. They provide us with some examples of changing religious habits. One of them, fasting, implies, among other things, strict dietary

restrictions, following monastic traditions. During fasting, dairy and meat products are excluded, on some days full abstinence from food is required, while on certain days cooked food, oil, fish, and seafood are allowed. If one reads Orthodox online forums, they will notice that it is during fasting that people often ask when exactly eating fish, shrimps, squid, octopus is permitted. At the same time, my interviews with Orthodox eco-activists show some interesting shifts. Some informants say they do not eat lobsters “because they are endangered species”, neither they eat octopus “because they are intelligent animals”. Thus, although seafood is generally allowed, even during fasting, some believers abstain from certain food not for religious but for ethical reasons. The idea of ethical consumption enters eco-theology and becomes important in the religious context.