

The Apocalypse... A New Genesis

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The Book of Revelation sheds light on the problem of the environment not by its description of natural disasters but by its quiet and constant reference to Christ the Lord of history. As our environmental studies cruise makes its way to Patmos, we must let ourselves be guided by the ‘Pantocrator’ whom the Apostle John never ceases to set before us. I am delighted to contribute to this first session with the Anglican Bishop of London, Richard Chartres, and Metropolitan John of Pergamon to whom I am linked by more than twenty years of dialogue with Orthodoxy.

It cannot be repeated too often that the Revelation to John describes not the end of the world but quite the contrary, the new creation of the world. The first word of this book, the Greek word *Apokalypsis*, signifies ‘revelation of what must soon take place’ (Revelation 1:1). And what must soon take place is a ‘new heaven and a new earth’ (Revelation 21:1). Thus the first book of the Bible links up with the last, Genesis with Revelation. What they have in common is that both speak of Creation, but the one speaks of it at the beginning of history (protology) and the other at the end of history (eschatology). What merits our attention is that both of them, in the light of a double Genesis, are better able to help the little David that is humanity today to confront the gigantic challenges of nature and the cosmos.

The great tradition of the Greek Fathers, from St Gregory of Nyssa to St Maximus the Confessor, shows us at which stage the history of salvation encompasses both man the ‘microcosm’ and the cosmos the ‘macranthropos’. Created in the image of God, mankind transcends the universe not in order to abandon it to its own devices but, on the contrary, to decipher its meaning through becoming its centre. We have signed a pact of sympathy and solidarity with the whole of Creation, visible and invisible, in spite of the torrent of violence that engulfs us. Every creature (and not only human beings) whether of the mineral, vegetable or animal realms, corresponds individually to a creative word of God. Our loving contemplation must encompass every living thing in a single glance. For Creation is an integral whole, like the Jerusalem hymned by the psalmist (Psalms 122:3). Yes, everything is ‘bound firmly together’, even if Genesis presents us with a God who takes his time to create. We need to nourish ourselves with the unitive vision of Creation. Nothing exists or lives of itself and everything is connected with everything else in relationships more profound than those glimpsed by the poet Baudelaire. The universe is not a simple back-cloth against which humanity should evolve according to the whims of a despot. For having wrongly understood or abused the word of Genesis which confided the management of Creation to it (Genesis 1:18), humanity ends up a victim of its own depredations and is only just beginning to measure the extent of the disaster.

Everywhere on the roads of Creation we encounter the person of Christ, the ‘first-born of all creation, for in Him all things were created’, according to the expression of St Paul in his Letter to the Colossians (1:15). Christ, the ‘last Adam’ (1 Corinthians 15:45), is prior to the first Adam for he pre-existed in the mind of God. The Adam of Genesis, the first to appear, is not the first; the second Adam, who comes after him, is the final *raison d'être* of the first and therefore constitutes his truth. The same name of Adam applies to humanity and to Him by whom humanity is fulfilled. ‘First-born of all creation’ - that means that we are caught up in the ascending movement, so dear to St Irenaeus, of ‘Christ the recapitulator’, which Paul has condensed in a phrase that is perhaps the most resplendent and most rousing of the whole Bible: ‘All are yours; and you are Christ’s; and Christ’s is God’s’ (1 Corinthians 3:22, 23).

The Revelation to John underlines the original place of Christ in the history of salvation. But it never touches on the theme - so important in Pauline theology - of the reconciliation and recapitulation of the cosmos in the risen Jesus. According to St Paul, Christ was placed by his resurrection in a totally new relationship with the cosmos: from Christ in glory undreamed of energies shine out over all Creation. The Christ portrayed in the Revelation to John nevertheless has points in common with the ‘cosmic Christ’ of St Paul. The two sacred authors profess what has been called a ‘christology of elevation’, but what is striking in the Book of Revelation is the distance which is established between Christ and the cosmos. At the time

of its Johannine redaction we are at the end of the first century, far from the fervour and enthusiasm of those first communities to whom the Apostle Paul, with a certain lyricism, presented the transfigured Kyrios. A tragic sound, almost a death knell, resounds over the world as the Revelation to John sees it. The vision which comes to us from Patmos is that of Churches caught up in torment and manhandled by satanic forces. It is about a vision, more dialectic than dualist, of Christ of the Apocalypse: on the one hand Christ is the Sovereign in front of whom the splendour of the deified emperors pales; on the other the same Christ is the Powerless one placed in check when the freedom of man and the malice of the demon block him with their refusal.

The Revelation to John is the great book towards which, as if by instinct, the thinking of the Church turns at every crucial (in the double sense of the word) stage of her history. It is to such a life-belt that Christians attach themselves when their faith is threatened in time of persecution. It is the true book of martyrs celebrating the test and the glory of all ‘those who have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb’ (Revelation 7:14). In these times of trouble the faithful are nourished by the vision of the new Jerusalem described in the last two chapters, 21 and 22, which are inspired by the lavish and comforting visions of Ezekiel (cf. Ezekial 40-48). Beyond the definitive triumph of Jesus Christ over all the forces of evil, including death, the Revelation to John invites us to contemplate, or rather to participate in the eternal marriage feast of the ‘new heaven’ and the ‘new earth’. The word ‘new’ emphasises the end of the book. The mysterious transformation in relation to the former order is more than a mere facelift; it is a real creation. A powerful trajectory shapes the story of Creation from beginning to end. God has the first and last word: ‘I am the Alpha and the Omega’ (Revelation 21:3).

It is important to underline - above all amongst environmentalists - that the new Creation does not define itself here by a sort of ascension to heaven of redeemed humanity, and therefore by the disappearance of the earth, but on the contrary by a solemn descent to earth. ‘I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a great voice from the throne saying, ‘Behold, the dwelling of God is with men..’ (Revelation 21:2, 3). It is curious to note also that in this vision of a new alliance between heaven and earth, the Book of Revelation expressly eliminates the sea - ‘and there was no longer any sea’ (Revelation 21:1): the sea, a residue of the primeval chaos of the ancient cosmogonies was in the biblical mentality a pejorative element. If the Book of Revelation had been composed after our cruise, no doubt the vision would have retained the sea in the new Creation, for is not the sea the future of the earth!

Finally, still in the perspective of an ecological reflection, one should note that this new Creation is brought about within the setting of a new city, a new Jerusalem, in contrast to the first Genesis when God had created a garden for man who thus lived in the midst of nature. In the new Genesis there is no return to a golden age, to a lost paradise. God installs man in a city, which symbolises and synthesises the work of man. But the city, which until then had been merged biblically with Babylon, a point of crystallisation of human arrogance and power, is no longer the sign of the revolt against God. Taking the name of the earthly Jerusalem, which was its preliminary sketch, the new Jerusalem descends from heaven like a work that is absolutely divine; it has no need of a temple, ‘for its temple is the Lord’ (Revelation 21:22); it does not even have need of the sun or the moon to illuminate it, ‘for the glory of God is its light’ (Revelation 21:23). But, just as in the garden of the first Genesis, there is ‘in the middle of the street of the city... a tree of life yielding twelve crops’ (Revelation 22:2) a year, a sign of the abundance and the durability of the new Jerusalem. Certainly man, even in his glorified state, remains a creature, because Another has put his name on his forehead. But although constantly threatened in his finitude, he is also constantly endowed with new life for eternity, grace building on grace, as he receives ‘the water of life without price’ (Revelation 22:17). I find nothing more beautiful than this reciprocal relationship of love between the creature and the Creator that makes of eternity an eternal Genesis where God and humanity can no longer do without each other.

To you, too, participants in this symposium as we sail towards Patmos, I address the last phrase of the entire Bible, the Johannine blessing which is the epilogue of the Book of Revelation and is also on the lips of the Church of every age: ‘The grace of the Lord be with you! Amen’ (Revelation 22:21).