

Ecological Ethics and Christian Values in Ukrainian Society. Catholic and Orthodox Perspectives

*Etyka ekologiczna i wartości chrześcijańskie w społeczeństwie ukraińskim.
Perspektywa katolicka i prawosławna*

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ABSTRACT

The author investigates the relevant topic of the formation of the interaction between Christian values and environmental ethics in Ukrainian society, which is characterized by the presence of various religious and confessional groups. They analyze the influence of religious beliefs and values on the formation of ecological consciousness and behavior in Ukrainian society. The article presents various approaches of Christian denominations to environmental issues and attitudes toward nature. The ecological beliefs and practices of Catholicism and Orthodoxy are examined, as well as practical aspects such as environmental programs, initiatives, and attitudes towards natural resources, which are reflected in the actions of church leaders and believers. The article explores concepts of environmental stewardship, responsible resource usage, climate change mitigation, and promotion of sustainable development advocated within various religious traditions. It also highlights the role of spiritual teachings, worship, and prayer services in shaping ecological awareness. The author investigates the interaction among different religious communities, as well as the possibilities of cooperation and dialogue to jointly develop an environmental ethics that considers the multi-confessional nature of Ukrainian society. The overall research context focuses on finding common approaches to environmental issues and developing strategies that meet the needs of different religious communities in contemporary Ukrainian society.

Keywords: religious communities; Christian values; environmental ethics; social responsibility; multi-confessionalism

STRESZCZENIE

Autor bada aktualny temat formowania relacji między chrześcijańskimi wartościami a etyką ekologiczną w społeczeństwie ukraińskim, charakteryzującym się obecnością różnych grup religijnych i wyznaniowych. Przeprowadza analizę wpływu przekonań religijnych i wartości na kształtowanie świadomości ekologicznej i zachowań w społeczeństwie ukraińskim. Artykuł przedstawia różnorodne podejścia chrześcijańskich wyznań do kwestii ekologicznych i stosunku do natury. Badane są ekologiczne przekonania i praktyki katolicyzmu i prawosławia, a także omawiane są praktyczne aspekty, takie jak programy ekologiczne, inicjatywy i stosunek do zasobów naturalnych, które znajdują odzwierciedlenie w działaniach liderów kościelnych i wiernych. W artykule zostały opisane koncepcje traktowania przyrody, odpowiedzialnego wykorzystania zasobów, walki ze zmianami klimatycznymi oraz promowania zrównoważonego rozwoju, które są propagowane w ramach różnych tradycji religijnych. Zwraca się również uwagę na rolę nauk duchowych, nabożeństw i modlitw w kształtowaniu świadomości ekologicznej. Autor artykułu bada interakcje między różnymi społecznościami religijnymi, a także możliwości współpracy i dialogu w celu wspólnego kształtowania etyki ekologicznej, uwzględniającej wielowyznaniowy charakter społeczeństwa ukraińskiego. Ogólny kontekst badania skupia się na poszukiwaniu wspólnych podejść do problemów ekologicznych i opracowywaniu strategii, które odpowiadałyby potrzebom różnych społeczności religijnych we współczesnym społeczeństwie ukraińskim.

Słowa kluczowe: społeczności religijne; wartości chrześcijańskie; etyka ekologiczna; odpowiedzialność społeczna; wielowyznaniowość

Introduction

In modern times, global environmental security problems have reached a level where the anthropogenic factor asserts itself with evident force. The imbalance in the system of relationships between nature and society has given rise to an ecological paradigm that affects all categories of human life, from physiological and cultural to religious. The formation of new ecological thinking is often associated with a change in the existing paradigm of social development, representing the need to create a relatively stable system of views, norms, principles, attitudes, and value orientations, which are decisive for actual time in the relations between the Society and Nature.

The new paradigms are not formed immediately. Many years pass before they acquire specific outlines and are established, determining people's relationship to nature, society, and others. Nowadays, developed countries' economic and political states and the degree of their "progressiveness" have a clear paradigmatic trend, determined by the amount of internal consumption, in which morality and the identity of culture are despised. This necessitates the search for value foundations to overcome the consumerist attitude to nature.

Christian values that formed the culture of European civilization, gave new meanings to nature and human existence, and became the basis of knowledge in the fields of natural science and human studies. By revealing the many questions raised by the environmental crisis, Christianity points to the source of the problem, which lies within the human soul. Environmental problems (in theoretical research and practical actions) are only beginning to become widespread in the churches and religious movements of Ukraine and their teachings. These issues were most actively manifested in the Catholic and Greek-Catholic Churches in Ukraine. However, other Christian denominations are also actively studying and adopting the experience of cooperation between churches (and secular institutions) in Western Europe and introducing the topic of environmental ethics into their worldview systems.

Paying attention to the principles of environmental ethics has particular importance for modern Ukrainian society. The war started by the Russian Federation against Ukraine causes not only the destruction of the population and the cities but also it brings on the pollution of the environment, and the threat of man-made accidents (for example, at nuclear plants). Therefore, there is a need to look for moral principles (including those originating from the field of ecological ethics) for the formation of preventive measures against environmental destruction. The religiosity of the population in Ukraine is one of the highest in the world. According to Jose Casanova's (2021) calculations, only 6–7% of Ukrainians do not believe in God; 72–75% consider themselves Orthodox, 9% belong to Greek Catholics (para. 7). The implementation of ecological ethics into the religious system of values can be an effective way to form the foundations of a careful attitude to nature and thus the establishment of an important aspect of moral consciousness. The Christian worldview is based on the Bible and represents the creation of man as a being that is inherently superior to nature. But man dominates in the name of God, as the guardian of divine creation, and therefore man's dominion is not absolute. God entrusted the world to man to steward it responsibly to ensure holistic and sustainable prosperity. Therefore, choices and actions related to ecology (that is, the use of the world created by God) are just subject to the moral law as all other human choices.

The Environmental Imperative in the Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church in Ukraine

The Roman Catholic Church and the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church represent Catholicism in Ukraine. Therefore, Catholic churches in Ukraine use a social doctrine in which environmental issues play an extremely important role. In particular, in the joint *Compendium* approved by the Conference of Roman Catholic Bishops of Ukraine and the Synod of Bishops of the Greek Catholic

Church of Ukraine (Dobrovolsky, 2005), a separate section *Environmental Protection* is dedicated to the issue of environmental protection along with such issues as Human Labor, Economic Life, Political Life, etc. In this document, attention is devoted to the biblical aspects of nature conservation, the essence of man's own creations and the technological universe, the inevitability of crisis, the relationship between human beings and the environment (delineation of the environment as a collective good, the use of biotechnology, the environment and the distribution of benefits, a new way of human life). The *Social Compendium* sees an effective reduction of the harmful impact of the production and consumption of goods on the environment in nature-friendly, innovative technologies and the development of alternative energy sources (Second Vatican Council, 1996). The emphasis of Ukrainian Catholics on the problems of environmental ethics has prerequisites. The principles of environmental ethics lie at the very core of the Catholic tradition. As John Mizzoni (2014) states:

The Catholic tradition views developing virtues and following the natural law as intimately linked. When one develops virtues one is following natural law. But in the Catholic tradition the concept of natural law has not only to do with ethics, but with human nature and God's plan for all creation. The tradition teaches that rational beings natively understand the difference between good and bad due to humans being made in the image and likeness of God. Human beings naturally apprehend good things as good. Thus, with regard to the natural environment, human beings do (and ought to) view the natural world as a good. (p. 413)

As Volodymyr Sheremeta (2006) noticed in historical review, the Catholic Church was one of the first among religious and public institutions to react to visible signs of an ecological threat. A year before the publication of the well-known report of the Club of Rome, *The Limits to Growth* (1972), which is considered the first milestone on the way to the awakening of ecological consciousness, Pope Paul VI in the apostolic letter *Octogesima adveniens* (1971) warns humanity against the excessive use of natural resources, which leads to the destruction of nature and, accordingly, to the destruction of the prerequisites for human life. *Octogesima adveniens* discussed the problem of accelerated environmental destruction after industrialization (No. 21). The Pope also relied on the criticism of modern practices of risky natural exploitation on the basis of the Church's principle of defining earthly goods for all people (No. 43). In 1971, the Roman Synod of Bishops, in the document *De iustitia in mundo*, analyzing the problem of social justice, touched on its ecological components and stated that the natural resources of air, water, and the entire biosphere of the Earth necessary for human life are not unlimited and, accordingly, they need to be to protect carefully as the common good of all humanity (Sheremeta, n.d., para. 6). The concern for the protection of nature is

one of the signs of our time, and the Church's reflections on this topic appeared in Catholic social teaching from the Second Vatican Council.

All these questions are raised and developed in current documents of the Catholic Church in Ukraine. Human relations with the world are defined as constitutive elements of human identity. This relationship is born as the result of an even deeper unity of man with God (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2008, p. 123). It is noted that God, creating man, placed on him the duty to take care of nature and entrusted him with the task of contributing to the fullness of creation with his work (see. Gen. 1, 26–29) (Word Project, 1962).

As Pope Benedict XVI points out in his encyclical *Caritas in veritate* (June 29, 2009), economic means or appropriate education alone will not be enough to preserve nature. These means are important, but the decisive problem is the comprehensive moral instruction of society (Benedict XVI, 2009). The Catholic Church in Ukraine is most concerned about this issue because unity with nature and the ability to properly interact with it is extremely important for the preservation of God's creation.

Because of this, an essential aspect of ecological education is to pay attention to children and young people to form the principles of ecological ethics together with the formation of a system of values and the introduction of Christian virtues into the worldview. For example, the UGCC Bureau for Ecology implements eco-education quite effectively. This implementation involves the development of topics and methodical materials for teaching children the principles of ecological ethics. For example, the following topics are offered for classes: How to prepare for spring and not forget about God's creation (ECOBUROUGCC, 2019); Plastic boats, a mini-landfill, scavenger hunt – how to teach children to protect God's creation?. In addition to methodological recommendations for priests and teachers, recommendations have also been developed for parents on how they can talk with children about those elements of nature created by God that help us survive and grow, such as light and water (for example, Tips for the catechist: how to teach children to care for nature).

Church sermons are a vital element in the education and formation of environmental awareness that Catholic priests use. In addition, the sermon itself is a highly effective way of communicating with the faithful and conveying to them essential principles and values related to the observance of ecological norms and the preservation of the environment.

For example, on September 8, 2020, Bishop Stepan Sus delivered a speech in the Patriarchal Cathedral on the 13th Sunday after the Outpouring of the Holy Spirit, where he emphasized:

God, like the master of the vineyard, organized everything, created, transferred, and entrusted his gifts to people. God created this world with an invisible foundation called

“gratitude” or simply the word “thank you”. It is free but very valuable! We are aware that a person who gives thanks already appreciates what he has. Human beings realize that their whole life, every day, event, and circumstance is given to them by God. The person who gives thanks will never appropriate, but will remember that everything is given by God to be used for the glory of God, to do good. (Synod of Bishops of the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church, 2008, pp. 261–262)

In these words, the essence of addressing people and educating them in the right relationship to nature can be clearly traced. The sermon emphasizes that nature should not be despised, but should be treated with respect as God’s creation.

Environmental guidelines issued on Easter deserve attention. Thus, within the framework of the initiative “Ecological conversion for the salvation of creation”, believers are given both general principles of ecological ethics and specific practical instructions on how to act (for example,

examining conscience, especially think about the question of the conformity of everyday life to God’s will in relation to neighbors and all of God’s creation; do not buy too much, because the production of things uses natural resources and harms the environment; separate waste at home and recycle it; do not set fire to fallen leaves and other remains of vegetation, it is better to give preference to their composting; walk more often and if possible, use public transport; do not decorate the Church and cemetery with plastic flowers and wreaths). (Xic, 2016)

The principles of ecological ethics can be presented as a way of human salvation. Within the framework of the Christian worldview, modern man is imagined as wounded by sins and, under their influence, commits new, even greater sins. We can see how those who call themselves Christians do evil to others and harm the environment and nature by cutting down forests, polluting the atmosphere and water bodies, irrationally using minerals, etc., thus, causing irreparable damage to our planet and future generations. Often they do it for earthly glory. Adherence to the principles of environmental ethics is defined as correcting this situation and setting a person to obey the Word of God.

In the Catechism of the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church, in Chapter V entitled *Transfiguration of the Universe*, attention is focused on the relationship between man and nature. It emphasizes the responsibility that human beings bear for God’s creation: “The human being is responsible for all creation. This responsibility manifests itself at different levels: in personal daily life, in the use of technical means and various technologies, and the use of natural resources and energy sources. The environment cannot be reduced to an object of manipulation and exploitation, nor absolutized and put above the dignity of the human person” (Synod of the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church, 2002, p. 143). The chapter

Christian Environmental Ethics should also be noted because it specifies the theological principles of environmental ethics in the understanding of the church. In particular, this part presents three paragraphs (996–998), which pay attention to the importance of nature as God’s creation and determine the need to treat it with respect. The principles of a responsible attitude towards nature are connected here with Christian love. It is noted that love for the invisible and omnipresent God is specified and confirmed in a person’s attitude toward God’s visible creations. Human beings cannot fully realize their love for God if they ignore the value of the world as God’s creation. Loving God the Creator, the human being also respects His creation, treating the environment responsibly. Nature serves a person, but on the other hand, it has its value. Respect for creation is manifested in a careful attitude to nature, conservation of earth’s resources, and other dimensions of the relationship between human beings and creation. Through respect for God’s creation, the human being praises God. A careful attitude towards nature is defined as a condition for the development of humankind. In particular, paragraph 998 states:

an important prerequisite for the development of humanity is the preservation of natural resources and the diversity of flora and fauna. The future of our civilization is impossible without awareness of the limits of nature’s ability to restore its resources and neutralize harmful substances and production waste that pollute it. People’s life activities in compliance with all moral requirements, which arise from the interconnectedness of all creations, is the only condition for the sustainable development of human civilization. (Catechism UGCC, 2012, p. 297)

The Formation of Environmental Awareness in Orthodox Churches in Ukraine

The largest Orthodox churches in Ukraine are: the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, which in 2019, received a Tomos of autocephaly from the Ecumenical Patriarch and is currently the most numerous Ukrainian Orthodox Church, and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate. According to the social survey, the majority of the population of Ukraine (79.3%) consider themselves Orthodox, and the largest number of them – 48.8% – consider themselves to belong to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine. 14.2% of Ukrainians belong to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, and 16.3% of respondents consider themselves Orthodox but without belonging to a specific Patriarchate – 16.3% (KIIS, 2019). In general, there is a noticeable trend according to which, in comparison with the Catholic churches, in the matter of environmental ethics, the Orthodox churches act rather inertly and do not pay enough attention to this problem.

Although in the circles of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, we can observe attention to environmental issues and the gradual development of this topic. For example, Metropolitan Epiphanius, during one of his speeches on the occasion of the holiday of ecological knowledge, noted that “the Church pays considerable attention to the preservation of the environment, and the cause of environmental problems is the spiritual and ethical problems of human beings, because God settled man in the world He created and instructed us to take care of creation, so that we take care not only of ourselves, but also of the plants and animals around us” (Pomisna, 2019b).

At the holy synod of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine on June 24, 2019, a decision was made to actively support environmental initiatives and establish a day of prayer for the protection of the natural environment in the Orthodox Church of Ukraine on the Sunday after September 1. This day is designated as the Day of Prayer for the Protection of the Natural Environment.

Every year, Metropolitan Epiphany publishes an address to Church members for Ecology Day. In these messages, it is emphasized that caring for and caring for the environment is a virtue and a good deed, while abusing God’s creation, its destructive exploitation and pollution is definitely a sin against the Creator. In his 2020 address, he notes the following:

In the paradise of Eden, God commanded Adam to rule the earth and take care of all living creatures (Gen. 1: 26–28). However, humanity fulfills this commandment dishonestly. Unfortunately, man’s dominion over nature, distorted by sin and strengthened by the development of technology, the consumerist attitude towards it has brought our planet to the brink of ecological disaster, has already destroyed a significant part of flora and fauna and posed the question of survival to humanity. The Church understands the development of science, technology or economy, but it calls for an ethical view of them, for a worldview change in the mind of humanity. First of all, worldview changes and, as a result, cultural changes in all spheres of life and the development of technologies of healing instead of technologies of destruction, correspond to the tasks set by God for humanity in relation to creation. (Pomisna, 2019a)

The Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) participates in events dedicated to environmental issues. In 2020, the OCU took part in the “Energy of Unity” project to increase energy efficiency in Ukraine, which became the first such action organized by religious organizations (Pomisna, 2020). The Orthodox Church of Ukraine representatives also took part in the Third International Halki Church Environmental Summit, convened with the blessing of the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew. At this summit, some environmental initiatives of the OCU were presented, in particular, the public movement for the restoration of the Pochayna River and the historical place of baptismal of Kyivan Rus.

The Orthodox Church of Ukraine is trying to change some established traditions and habits of Ukrainians in order to increase environmental awareness. For example, on the eve of New Year's holidays, the OCU called not to cut live Christmas trees, but to use those that do not harm the environment. Church also recommended its members not to use plastic flowers and wreaths on the graves of relatives, as their production and disposal harms the environment.

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) of the Moscow Patriarchate paid attention to environmental issues in the social concept of the church. In this document there is a separate section "Church and Problems of Ecology". It states that the Church, aware of its responsibility for the fate of the world, is deeply concerned about the problems generated by modern civilization:

Today, the appearance of the Earth is undergoing changes on a planetary scale. The subsoil, soil, water, air, animal and plant life are affected. The surrounding nature is almost completely involved in the sustenance of man, who is no longer satisfied with the variety of its gifts, but relentlessly exploits entire ecosystems. Human activity, which has reached scales comparable to biosphere processes, is constantly growing due to the acceleration of the pace of development of science and technology. Widespread pollution of the natural environment by industrial waste, incorrect agricultural techniques, destruction of forests and land cover lead to the suppression of biological activity, to the inevitable reduction of the genetic diversity of life (...) The ecological balance is disturbed; man is faced with the fact of the occurrence of irreparable harmful processes in nature, including the exhaustion of his natural reproductive powers. (DOBRO, n.d., XIII. 1, para. 1)

The Church explains the causes of environmental problems through the fall of man, which resulted in his selfishness. In the social concept, it is noted that the relationship between man and the surrounding nature was broken even in prehistoric times, the reason for which was the fall of man and his alienation from God. The sin that arose in the soul of a person had a detrimental effect not only on him, but also on the entire surrounding world. The first human crime was reflected in nature, as in a mirror. The seed of sin, having descended in the human heart, produced, as the Holy Scripture testifies, "thorns and thistles" (Gen. 3, 18) on the earth. The complete organic unity of man and the surrounding world, which existed before the Fall, became impossible (Gen. 2, 19–20). In their relations with nature, which have acquired a consumerist character, people began to be guided more and more often by selfish motives. They began to forget that the only Lord of the Universe is God. Considering the last statement, it can be noted that the ecological ethics of the Church is based on the idea of theocentrism. And the main principle on which the position of the Church in matters of ecology is based is the principle of unity and integrity of the world created by God. The Ukrainian

Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate notes that it does not consider the surrounding nature separately, as a closed structure. The plant, animal and human worlds are interconnected. Nature is not a container of resources intended for selfish and irresponsible consumption, but a home where man is not the master, but the ruler of the house, as well as a temple, where man is a priest who serves, however, not nature, but the only Creator. In addition, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church connects the ecological crisis with the anthropological crisis:

The relationship between anthropology and ecology is especially evident these days, when the world is experiencing two crises at the same time: spiritual and ecological. In modern society, people sometimes lose awareness of life as a gift from God, and in some places the very meaning of existence, if it is reduced only to physical existence. With such an attitude to life, the surrounding nature is no longer perceived as a home, let alone a temple, but becomes only a “living environment”. A person who spiritually degrades leads to degradation and nature, because it is incapable of transforming the world. (DOBRO, n.d., XIII. 5, para. 2)

Thus, overcoming environmental problems is connected primarily with the internal spiritual transformation of a person, and not with any external factors aimed at protecting nature.

Conclusions

The protection and preservation of natural wealth and the diversity of plant and animal life are extremely important elements in the development of human society. The development of our civilization is impossible without an understanding of the limitations of our ability to restore natural resources and neutralize harmful substances and industrial waste that pollute it. Due to the interdependence of everything created, life in accordance with all moral requirements is the only condition for the sustainable development of human civilization.

The specific character of Christian theology in the formalization of social service, alongside ecology and philosophy, is one of the sources of ecological ethics. Unlike governmental authority, the Church has always been the primary custodian of tradition and ethics. Therefore, today, the Church takes the path of “ecologizing” societal consciousness. An outstanding feature of the Christian theology paradigm and its significance in social service to society is its potential openness to contemporary issues, reflected both in the formulation and discursive expression of these issues. To achieve this, a correct interpretation based on the works of the Fathers, of the Holy Scriptures, and the experience of spiritual life is necessary.

The Church's orientation towards issues of environmental conservation in its quest for religious explanations of the interconnection between nature and humanity can become a powerful source of worldwide environmental activity. Today, there is a keenly felt need for Christian theological concepts on ecological matters that would demonstrate that the renewal (and preservation) of the natural environment involves a fundamental renewal of "self", providing ethical and social models for the proper relationship with nature.

The practical collaboration between religious and secular institutions in the sphere of nature protection against destruction is becoming a global trend. Consequently, Ukrainian society, gradually integrating into global political, economic, and other processes, objectively encourages religious leaders to support or initiate ecological initiatives (the alarming state of ecology in most regions of the country serves as an additional stimulus). In many countries, including those less developed than Ukraine, religious organizations initiate and fund conservation programs, taking under their care specific species of flora or fauna that are disappearing.

Another trend in the contemporary practices of churches in Ukraine in the field of ecology is a certain inertia of other churches and religious movements regarding participation in activities related to environmental issues. Only in the last year or two has this trend slowly begun to change. Currently, it concerns the involvement of certain Protestant churches, Islamic centers, individual religious figures in ecological movements, church gatherings, and other events dedicated to environmental issues.

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