

Ordained Animals: Retrieving Human Exceptionality in John Zizioulas's Theo-Ecology

This paper seeks to expand on the promise of Zizioulas's ecology by retrieving his understanding of human exceptionality in relation to nonhumans. Although Zizioulas's framing of humans as "priests of creation" is justly lauded as a powerful resource for ecological theology, it remains limited by his understanding of the human priestly role as set apart from, rather than within, the community of creation. The result is a vision that privileges humans over nonhumans, risking their subordination to human ends, even if benignly intentioned. I suggest a corrective by drawing on the ecclesiology of Nicholas Afanasiev, who reframes ordained priesthood as existing not apart from the laity, but within the "royal priesthood" of all the baptized faithful. I then apply this insight analogically to argue that humans are not substantially set apart from nonhumans but exist as members within a cosmic ecclesial communion whose prototype is the divine-human organism of the Church. Within this cosmic communion, all beings are called to participate in the one high priesthood of Christ by offering their own "sacrifice of praise" to the Father. Yet, humans receive a unique vocation as "ordained animals" by virtue of being created in the image of the Son of God with the capacity to participate in his kenosis. Taking up this ordination means setting aside claims to self-existence to enable all beings, both human and nonhuman, to attain species-specific forms of flourishing and communion with their creator. Retrieved this way, Zizioulas's "priesthood of creation" serves to reorient our ecological practices away from mastery and toward the kenotic service of life in all its forms.

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