

THE GREEN PATRIARCH
Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew
As a Pioneer of Ecological Change

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i. Introduction

When Pope Francis released his environmental encyclical, *Laudato Si'*, on June 18, 2015, it was not surprising that he singled out and highlighted the example of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, the spiritual leader of the world's 300 million Orthodox Christians. We are now all familiar with the fact that, over the past two decades, the world has witnessed alarming environmental degradation – with climate change, loss of biodiversity, increase in biofuels and destruction of natural resources – as well as a widening gap between rich and poor.¹ During the same period, however, arguably alone among religious leaders, Bartholomew has discerned “the signs of the times” (Matthew 16.3) and consistently proclaimed the primacy of spiritual values in determining environmental ethics. These endeavors have earned him the title “Green Patriarch” – coined and publicized by the media in 1996, while formalized in the White House in 1997 by Al Gore, Vice President of the United States.

In 1994, the University of the Aegean conferred an honorary doctoral degree on Patriarch Bartholomew, the first of a long series of

¹ See my article “Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew: insights into an Orthodox Christian worldview,” in *The International Journal of Environmental Studies* 64, 1 (2007) 9-18.

awards and honorary degrees presented to the Patriarch in recognition of his efforts and initiatives for the environment, including the first international Visionary Award for Environmental Achievement from the New York-based organization Scenic Hudson in 2000 and the Sophie Prize of Norway in 2002. In 2008, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew was named one of *Time Magazine's* 100 Most Influential People in the World for “defining environmentalism as a spiritual responsibility.”

ii. Initiatives and Activities; Seminars and Symposia

The environmental initiatives of the Orthodox Church date to the mid-1980s. At a Pan-Orthodox Conference in Geneva (1986), representatives voiced concern about pollution; the emphasis was on leaving behind a better world. Several Inter-Orthodox consultations followed, one on the island of Patmos (1988) to mark the 1900th anniversary since the writing of the Book of Revelation; delegates there recommended that the Ecumenical Patriarchate designate a day of prayer for the environment.

The following year, Ecumenical Patriarch Demetrios published the first encyclical letter on the environment, proclaiming September 1st – the beginning of the church year – as a day for all Orthodox Christians to pray for God’s creation. Since 1989, an encyclical is published annually, while the church’s foremost hymnographer, Monk Gerasimos, was commissioned to compose a special prayer service for the environment.

Just one month after his election in 1991, Patriarch Bartholomew organized an environmental gathering in Crete, forging a close bond with the World Wildlife Fund and its international chairman, the Duke

of Edinburgh.² A month later, he convened an unprecedented meeting of all Orthodox Primates, the first of six to date and an historical expression of unity, inviting Orthodox leaders to inform congregations about the urgency of global warming. During that meeting, all Orthodox Heads embraced the recommendation of Bartholomew to observe September 1st as a day of prayer for the environment – a commitment subsequently accepted by other Christian organizations (including the World Council of Churches and the Conference of European Churches).³ In 1994, a seminar was held at the Theological School of Halki, the first of five successive annual summer seminars, hitherto unparalleled in the Orthodox world, to consider the ecological dimensions of Religious Education, Ethics, Communications, Justice, and Poverty.

Convinced that any response to climate change involve dialogue with every Christian confession, religious faith and scientific discipline, in 1994 the Patriarch created the *Religious and Scientific Committee* (RSE). Chaired by distinguished theologian Metropolitan John [Zizioulas] of Pergamon,⁴ RSE hosted eight symposia from 1995 to 2009 – under the joint auspices of the European Commission or the United Nations – to reflect on our planet's waters. These sea-borne symposia assembled in the Mediterranean and Black Seas, on the Danube and

² Ecumenical Patriarchate assisted by the World Wide Fund for Nature, *Orthodoxy and the Ecological Crisis*, Helsinki: WWF International, 1990. See also Ecumenical Patriarchate assisted by Syndesmos, *So That God's Creation Might Live: The Orthodox Church Responds to the Ecological Crisis*. Proceedings of the Inter-Orthodox Conference on Environmental Protection, Crete, 1991.

³ In 2015 (!), the Orthodox Church of Russia – perhaps reluctantly – announced that it, too, would join in such prayer for the environment, albeit on the first Sunday after September 1st.

⁴ See a series of his articles, entitled “Preserving God’s creation: three lectures on theology and ecology,” *King’s Theological Review* XII, 1989.

Amazon Rivers, on the Adriatic and Baltic Seas, in the Arctic Ocean and along the Mississippi River.

iii. Another Worldview; A Different Vision

The way we view our planet reflects how we relate to it. We treat our planet in a godless manner precisely because we perceive it as “god-forsaken.” Unless we change the way we see the world, then we shall simply be dealing with symptoms, not their causes. Ultimately, then, our struggle against climate change is a battle over how we imagine our world; it is a crisis of differing – even conflicting – worldviews.⁵

In his now classic article, “The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis,” medieval historian Lynn White, Jr. (1907-1987), already suspected this truth – although neither he nor subsequent scholars elaborated on it:

The Greek saint [he wrote] contemplates; the Western saint acts. ... The implications of Christianity for the conquest of nature would emerge more easily in the Western atmosphere.⁶

⁵ For representative works by Orthodox theologians, see P. Sherrard, 1987, *The Eclipse of Man and Nature: An Enquiry into the Origins and Consequences of Modern Science*, Felton, Northumberland: Lindisfarne Press, 1987; P. Sherrard, *Human Image, World Image*, Ipswich: Golgonooza Press, 1990; Metropolitan Kallistos [Ware] of Diokleia, *Through the Creation to the Creator*, Friends of the Centre Papers, 1997; Metropolitan Paulos Gregorios, 1978, *The Human Presence: An Orthodox View of Nature*, Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1978 (later published as *The Human Presence: Ecological Spirituality and the Age of the Spirit*, 1987). See also John Chryssavgis, *Beyond the Shattered Image: Orthodox Insights into the Environment*, Minneapolis, MN: Light and Life, 1999.

⁶ *Science* 155, March 1967, 1203-1207.

Often, we are convinced that solving the ecological crisis is a matter of acting differently, more effectively, more sustainably. Let's not forget, however, that it is our very actions that led us in the first place to the mess we're in. Paradoxically, ecological correction may in fact begin with environmental in-action, with proper vision and awareness.

For Patriarch Bartholomew, it is a matter of truthfulness to God and honesty with the world. This is why he condemns environmental abuse as a sin!⁷ Only a radical reversal of our values and ways – what an early Apostolic text calls “a great understanding” – can provide any solution to the impasse. The environment is not only a political or a technological issue; it is, as the Patriarch underlines, primarily a religious and spiritual issue. In nature, survival and salvation coincide.

Martin Parry, former co-chair of the IPCC, once observed: “We are all used to talking about these impacts coming in the lifetimes of our children and grandchildren. Now we know that it's us.”⁸ So the problem lies in how we define reality: physics and chemistry demand radical cuts in carbon emissions; political realism tells us to advance slowly. In this battle, there is only one choice: economic tax codes and legislative regulations can be amended; the laws of nature cannot. Seeing clearly and candidly is the only way of countering political denial. The race is desperate. Politics is chasing reality, and the distance between them isn't closing nearly fast enough.

⁷ See John Chryssavgis, *On Earth as in Heaven: Ecological Vision and Initiatives of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew*, New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2012.

⁸ See M. Parry (et al.), *Climate Change 2007: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability. Contribution of Working Group II to the Fourth IPCC Assessment*. Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007, 990 pages.

iv. The Role of Religion; The Way Forward

It will take no less than a high-profile crusade by religious and civic leaders to force change among our political leaders, a movement as critically urgent and as morally imperative as any campaign for fundamental human and civil rights. Such a movement demands global involvement and personal sacrifice. We all need to see the world differently, to learn to change our habits – from what we *want* to what the world *needs*.

It is not just a matter of pursuing alternatives, whether political (like cap-and-trade) or personal (like carbon offsets). These solutions resemble medieval “indulgences,” resulting neither in a radical response to the challenge at hand nor in any substantial change of lifestyle. They just create a sense of self-complacency, ultimately promoting only a sense of self-sufficiency.

And here lies the heart of the problem. For we are unwilling to adopt simpler lives. If we are guilty of relentless waste in our world, it may be because we have lost the spirituality of simplicity and frugality. The challenge is: How do I live in such a way that promotes harmony – not division? How do I live in such a way that communicates gratitude or generosity – not greed or arrogance?

And when we begin to understand that climate change is not just one in a long list of problems confronting politicians, then we gain new insight, a new lens through which to perceive our world. Through this perspective, foreign policy looks very different; threats to security can be met by shipping technology to China, rather than by shipping weapons to China’s enemies. Through this lens, the economy too

appears radically different; we abandon the urge for unbridled expansion and focus on the sustainability we so desperately need.

Some years ago, Larry Summers (Bill Clinton’s secretary of the treasury, a World Bank economist, and Barack Obama’s director of the national economic council) declared he “cannot and will not accept any ‘speed limit’ on American economic growth.”⁹ Have we become so addicted to fantasies about riches without risk and profit without price?

Religious and civic leaders must persistently remind political leaders that there is no way of endlessly manipulating our environment that comes without cost or consequence. We are – as we now know well and as mystics have taught through the ages – intimately and inextricably bound up with the history and destiny of our world.

Economy and technology are toxic when divorced from our vocation to see the world as God would see it. And if God saw the world as “very good” on that sixth day of creation, then we too can begin to sense in our world the promise of beauty and to see the world in its unfathomable interrelatedness. Then, we *shall* hear the grass grow and feel the seal’s heart beat. To paraphrase the Psalmist: “All things look to God. When God sends forth his breath, then creation happens all over again; and the face of the earth is renewed.” (Psalm 103 [104]. 27-30)

v. Conclusion

We tend to call this an ‘ecological’ crisis, which is a fair description in so far as its results are manifested in the ecological sphere. Yet, the

⁹ On Larry Summers, see Richard Bradley, *Harvard Rules: Lawrence Summers and the Battle for the World’s Most Powerful University*, New York: Harper Collins, 2005.

crisis is not first of all ecological. It is a crisis concerning the way we perceive reality, the way we imagine or image our world. We treat our planet in an inhuman, god-forsaken manner precisely because we see it in this way, precisely because we see ourselves in this way. Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew offers a refreshing, alternative way of seeing ourselves in relation to the natural world.

As a religious leader, the Ecumenical Patriarch's initiatives to protect the environment are worthy of acclamation and emulation. His worldview, derived from the ancient values of the Orthodox Christian Church, deserves greater attention and application.