



## **ECEN Assembly 2021:**

### **DOES CLIMATE CHANGE AND SUSTAINABLE FUTURE POSE A PARTICULAR THEOLOGICAL CONCERN?**

#### **AN ORTHODOX POINT OF VIEW**

Archbishop Job of Telmessos

The Orthodox Church was a pioneer in addressing the environmental crisis since 1986. If she did so, it was definitely not out of political correctness or for demagogic reasons, but on the basis of deep theological convictions: as we read in the first book of the Bible, in Genesis, the world has been created good by God (Gen 1), and man has been established as its guardian (Gen 2:15).

Facing the negative consequences of industrialization and human economy on the environment, scientists forced states and governments in the 1980's to take legislative action to protect the earth. For example, an intergovernmental group of experts on climate change was created in 1988 by the United Nations environment program. Thanks to this initiative, scientific knowledge on climate change was widely relayed in public opinion and led, in 1997, to signing the Kyoto Protocol, an international agreement aimed at reducing greenhouse gas emissions, which unfortunately did not come into force until 2005.

The Metropolitan of Pergamon, John Zizioulas, recounts that the involvement of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople in the protection of the creation started by reading an article by Lynn White, entitled "The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis" published in 1967 in the journal *Science*<sup>1</sup>. This article already asserted that the roots of the ecological crisis were theological. According to White, Christian theology was largely responsible for the ecological crisis because of the divine command of the book of Genesis: "Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, and subjugate it; and rule over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every animal that moves on the earth" (Gen 1:28). Although this article primarily criticized Western Christianity, the Orthodox Church could not remain indifferent to the ecological crisis but had to be self-critical in asking whether Orthodox theology was responsible or not for the ecological crisis, and if it was the case, how to help finding a solution.

In his recent book on the spiritual foundations of the ecological crisis, the French Orthodox theologian Jean-Claude Larchet sees the origin of the current environmental crisis in a paradigm shift operated in the West by Renaissance humanism (14<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> centuries) which exalted man in himself and for himself, even, replacing a conception of the theocentric world by an anthropocentric one. "Nature is no longer referred to God, but to man alone, and it is man who henceforth defines its meaning, its value and its use". To use Descartes's expression in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, man became the "master and possessor of nature", thus leading to a relationship of power, domination, possession and exploitation of nature<sup>2</sup>.

When in the 1980's ecology became more and more "political", the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople took initiatives for the protection of creation, with the conviction that the environmental crisis could not be managed exclusively by scientists, scholars and politicians, but that theology should awaken humanity to what actually threatens our planet today. The late Ecumenical Patriarch Dimitrios

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<sup>1</sup> Lynn White, "The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis", *Science* 155/3767 (1967), p. 1203-107. Cf. J. Zizioulas, "Sacerdoti della creazione. Il servizio del Patriarcato Ecumenico per la protezione del creato" in *L'uomo custode del creato. Atti del XX Convegno ecumenico internazionale di spiritualità ortodossa. Bose, 5-8 settembre 2012*, Bose, 2013, p. 63-64.

<sup>2</sup> Jean-Claude Larchet, *Les fondements spirituels de la crise écologique*, Genève : Syrtex, 2018, p. 72.



(1914-1991) took at that time the initiative to address this question in a prophetic encyclical, dated of 1<sup>st</sup> September 1989, which instituted the first day of September, which is also the first day of the Orthodox ecclesiastical year, as a day of prayer for the protection and preservation of the natural environment. This initiative was subsequently followed by the World Council of Churches, the Conference of European Churches and other Christian Churches.

The Ecumenical Patriarchate organized a series of seminars, conferences and symposia in order to examine the ecological problem from the perspective of both science and theology. Two seminars were organized at the Orthodox Center of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Chambésy/Geneva in 1992 and 1993, followed by a series of five seminars held at the Halki School of Theology between 1994 and 1998. These seminars stressed the importance of ecological education and environmental awareness in an ecumenical, interreligious and interdisciplinary approach. The Halki seminars examined the questions of religious education (1994), ethics (1995), society (1996), justice (1997) and poverty (1998). Later, a series of eight scientific and international theological conferences on the preservation of rivers and seas were organized by the Committee on Religion, Science and the Environment of the Ecumenical Patriarchate between 1995 and 2009: in the Aegean Sea (1995), in the Black Sea (1997), on the Danube (1999), the Adriatic Sea (2002), the Baltic Sea (2003), the Amazon (2006), the Arctic Ocean (2007) and the Mississippi (2009). More recently, the Ecumenical Patriarchate organized four Halki Summits: on “The Conversation on the Environment, Ethics and Innovation” (2012), “Theology, Ecology and Speech” (2015); “Theological Education and Ecological Awareness” (2019) and this year, “Covid-19 and Climate Change”, which was held online last January (2021).

As we can see, the Ecumenical Patriarchate has contributed to the protection of creation by establishing a constructive dialogue between theology and science. At the very first congress on religion, science and the environment organized by the Ecumenical Patriarchate on the island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea in 1995, which brought together both theologians and scientists, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew expressed in his inaugural speech the hope that science could save faith from fantasy, while faith could generate energy for a new world<sup>3</sup>.

Five years ago, the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church, convened on the island of Crete, did not ignore the question of the environment. On the contrary, it has emphasized the spiritual and moral causes of the ecological crisis, connected with greed, avarice and egoism, considering them as having led humanity to over-exploitation of natural resources, pollution and to climate change. The council suggested that “the Christian response to the problem demands repentance for the abuses, an ascetic frame of mind as an antidote to overconsumption, and at the same time a cultivation of the consciousness that man is a steward and not a possessor of creation”<sup>4</sup>.

Let us now look at the major theological principles of the Christian response to the environmental crisis and climate change from the perspective of Orthodox theology. We see three major theses: 1) Man as the steward and priest of creation; 2) The ascetic way of life; and 3) The eucharistic mind.

### **Man as the steward and priest of creation**

In response to the Lynn White who had accused Christian theology to be responsible for the ecological crisis because of the divine command to fill the earth and subjugate it (Gen 1:28), Orthodox

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<sup>3</sup> Address of His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew upon the Opening of the International Environmental Symposium at Sea, in S. Hobson & J. Lubchenco, *Revelation and the Environment. Patmos Symposium I (20-27 September 1995)*, Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 1997, p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> Message, 8. [https://www.holycouncil.org/-/message?\\_101\\_INSTANCE\\_VA0WE2pZ4Y0I\\_languageId=en\\_US](https://www.holycouncil.org/-/message?_101_INSTANCE_VA0WE2pZ4Y0I_languageId=en_US)



theology underlines that man is not the processor of the earth, but its steward (*oikonomos*) and its guardian. Indeed, we find also in the book of Genesis another divine commandment given to man concerning the earth: to “work it and take care of it” (Gen 2:15). We can find also an echo of this idea in Christ’s parable on the “faithful and wise steward” (Lk 12:42). Thus, Orthodox theology rejects the abuse of natural resources as a misinterpretation of God’s command to rule the world (Gen 1:28) in which White saw the cause of the contemporary environmental crisis. This is precisely what the late Ecumenical Patriarch Demetrios stated in his historical encyclical of 1<sup>st</sup> September 1989:

“The abuse by contemporary man of his privileged position in the creation and of the Creator’s order to him ‘to have dominion over the earth’ (Gen. 1:28), has already led the world to the edge of apocalyptic self-destruction, either in the form of natural pollution which is dangerous for all living beings, or in the form of the extinction of many species of the animal and plant world, or in various other forms. Scientists and other men of learning warn us now of the danger, and speak of phenomena which are threatening the life of our planet, such as the so called ‘greenhouse effect’ whose first indications have already been noted.”<sup>5</sup>

Responding to such a misinterpretation, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew pointed out in his inaugural address at the Fourth Congress on Religion, Science and the Environment organized by the Ecumenical Patriarchate in the Adriatic Sea in 2002 that God should not be ignored when addressing the issue of the environment<sup>6</sup>. Ecology is not just a problem between man and nature, but should involve first and foremost God as the Creator. Orthodox theology thus introduces a third factor in the relationship between humanity and the environment who is the Creator of humanity and of the earth, the One who instituted commandments for a harmonious coexistence of all elements of the universe. While secularism operates a division between these three factors – God, man and earth, Orthodox theology underlines that humanity has received from its Creator the mandate of serve as a steward and guardian of the creation in the commandment to preserve it. To cultivate and to preserve the earth thus implies an active responsibility. For this reason, humanity cannot remain passive or indifferent to the environmental crisis.

The rediscovery of this intimate bond between God, man and the world is what Orthodox theology identifies as man’s vocation to be the “priest of creation”. The vocation of man to be the “priest of creation” implies having a liturgical gaze on creation. It means bringing the cosmos back to God in an incessant doxology and thanksgiving to God for the gift of creation. The created world is not man’s possession, but a gift received from God the Creator for which humanity ought to be thankful.

This conception of man as steward and priest of creation explains why the commitment of the Orthodox Church to the protection of creation differs from most environmental movements – not so much in the desire to preserve natural resources or the climate, which is common to all scientists and politicians, – but in the key concepts of moderation and thanksgiving.

### **The ascetic way of life**

Ecumenical Patriarch Demetrios’ encyclical of 1989 prophetically noted that the root of the ecological crisis was consumerism, based on increasing desires and lust:

“Instead of the Eucharistic and ascetic spirit with which the Orthodox Church brought up her children for centuries, we observe today a violation of nature for the satisfaction not of basic human

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. <http://www.lifegivingfount.oh.goarch.org/assets/files/1989%20Ecumenical%20Patriarch%20Dimitrios.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Introductory Remarks of His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew at the Inaugural Proceedings of the 4<sup>th</sup> International and Inter-Religious Symposium on the Adriatic Sea, in N. Ascherson & A. Marshall, *The Adriatic Sea. A Sea at Risk. A Unity of Purpose*, Athens: Religion, Science and the Environment, 2003, p. 20.



needs, but of man's endless and constantly increasing desires and lust, encouraged by the prevailing philosophy of the consumer society."

In response to such a deviation, in order to protect the gift of creation, Orthodox theology calls humanity to develop an ascetic ethos which implies moderation, sobriety and self-control. Man should not consume by impulse and beyond the limits, but rather manifest a sense of frugality and abstinence from certain goods. The ascetic way of life promoted by Orthodox theology and spirituality suggests moderation, through the practice of fasting among many other things, as well as by cultivating a sense of solidarity for the entire creation.

In the Orthodox tradition, the cycle of the seasons is not only marked by a series of feasts and festivities, but also by periods of fasting and abstinence which encourage man to develop an ascetic spirit. It is a fact that the Orthodox Christian fasts over half of the year. The Holy and Great Council of Crete emphasized the importance of fasting and its observance today by reaffirming the link seen by the Church Fathers, such as Saint Basil the Great, between the ascetic practice of fasting and the first divine commandment in Paradise not to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil (Gen 2:16-17)<sup>7</sup>.

The practice of fasting in the Orthodox tradition involves abstinence from certain foods. As a general rule, it excludes any consumption of meat as well as certain animal products, such as eggs and dairy products. On certain days of the year even fish is excluded, as well as wine and oil. In addition to cultivating moderation in humans, this practice also allows creation to rest. But it also promotes a culture of solidarity. The charitable aspect of fasting has unfortunately often been forgotten or overlooked lately. But the Bible and the patristic tradition teach us that the money saved through fasting – because of the deprivation of certain foods – should not be kept as gain but distributed and shared with the poor in the form of almsgiving. In the Old Testament, Prophet Isaiah said about fasting which pleases God: "Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter, when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?" (Is 58:7). This social dimension of fasting ought not to be forgotten in link of the environmental crisis.

### **The eucharistic mind**

Besides the ascetic way of life, Orthodox theology also cultivates a "Eucharistic mind". By this way, it emphasizes that the created world is not our possession, but a gift from God the Creator which man ought to receive with gratitude and thanksgiving. In his encyclical of 1989, Ecumenical Patriarch Demetrios pointed out to the celebration of the Eucharist, in which bread and wine are offered to God and being sanctified by his grace in order to become the body and blood of Christ:

"The Church in each Divine Liturgy continues this reference and offering (of creation to God) in the form of the Bread and the Wine, which are elements taken from the material universe. In this way the Church continuously declares that man is destined not to exercise power over creation, as if he were the owner of it, but to act as its steward, cultivating it in love and referring it in thankfulness, with respect and reverence, to his Creator."

Indeed, when offering the Eucharistic prayer, the Orthodox Church repeats the words of King David: "Thine own of Thine own, we offer to Thee, in behalf of all, and for all" (cf. 1 Chronicles 29:14). It is significant that in the sacrament of the Eucharist, humanity offers to God what it has received from him. Man offers to God bread and wine – which are actually the transformation by man's labor of the wheat and of the grapes found in the creation and which are a gift from the Creator. In return, God transforms through his grace the bread and the wine into the sacramental body and blood of Christ. The

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<sup>7</sup> The importance of fasting and its observance today, 1. [https://www.holycouncil.org/-/fasting?\\_101\\_INSTANCE\\_VA0WE2pZ4Y0I\\_languageId=en\\_US](https://www.holycouncil.org/-/fasting?_101_INSTANCE_VA0WE2pZ4Y0I_languageId=en_US)



Eucharist is thus a perfect example of synergy: man faithfully collaborating with the will of God in a constructive, and not destructive way. This grateful way of consuming natural resources received from the Creator is precisely what Orthodox theology calls a eucharistic mind.

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To conclude, I would like to quote a significant paragraph from the encyclical of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church, which admirably sums up the theological concern for climate change and a sustainable future:

*“The roots of the ecological crisis are spiritual and ethical, inhering within the heart of each man. This crisis has become more acute in recent centuries on account of the various divisions provoked by human passions – such as greed, avarice, egotism and the insatiable desire for more – and by their consequences for the planet, as with climate change, which now threatens to a large extent the natural environment, our common ‘home’. The rupture in the relationship between man and creation is a perversion of the authentic use of God’s creation. The approach to the ecological problem on the basis of the principles of the Christian tradition demands not only repentance for the sin of the exploitation of the natural resources of the planet, namely, a radical change in mentality and behavior, but also asceticism as an antidote to consumerism, the deification of needs and the acquisitive attitude. It also presupposes our greatest responsibility to hand down a viable natural environment to future generations and to use it according to divine will and blessing. In the sacraments of the Church, creation is affirmed and man is encouraged to act as a steward, protector and ‘priest’ of creation, offering it by way of doxology to the Creator – ‘Your own of your own we offer to You in all and for all’ – and cultivating a Eucharistic relationship with creation.”<sup>8</sup>*

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<sup>8</sup> Encyclical, V, 14. [https://www.holycouncil.org/-/encyclical-holy-council?\\_101\\_INSTANCE\\_VA0WE2pZ4Y0I\\_languageId=en\\_US](https://www.holycouncil.org/-/encyclical-holy-council?_101_INSTANCE_VA0WE2pZ4Y0I_languageId=en_US)