

# Climate Change

## An Eastern Orthodox Christian Perspective

### Reverend Dr. John Chryssavgis

*The world is charged with the grandeur of God!*

Gerard Manley Hopkins

In September 2007, His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, spiritual leader of 300 million Orthodox Christians worldwide and affectionately labeled “the Green Patriarch” by Al Gore, organized an interdisciplinary and interfaith symposium in Greenland, entitled *The Arctic: Mirror of Life*. This was the 7<sup>th</sup> of (now) eight such gatherings to highlight the state and fate of the



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world's main bodies of water – a sacred symbol for most religions and a natural resource that covers seven-tenths of the earth's surface. Last October, a similar symposium was held in New Orleans on the Mississippi River. Participants at these symposia include religious leaders, scientists, policy-makers, environmentalists, activists, local communities, and media. These unique global gatherings promote an alliance between science and religion in a spirit of mutual respect.<sup>1</sup> James Hansen was a participant and speaker at the Arctic Symposium. So it has been an honor to include him in the initiatives of our Church.

Yet, even as over the past two decades, perhaps no other worldwide religious leader has persistently proclaimed the primacy of spiritual values in determining environmental ethics as Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, during the same period, the world has witnessed alarming ecological degradation, increasing failure to implement environmental policies, and an ever-widening gap between rich and poor.

This is why it would be fair to say that the hallmark of the Patriarch's initiatives – as, indeed, the efforts of any of us – is not success, but in fact humility. I believe that a sense of modest realism is what ultimately

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<sup>1</sup> See the website of the Religious and Scientific Committee of the Ecumenical Patriarchate: <http://www.rsesymposia.org>. Also, see the website of the Ecumenical Patriarchate: <http://www.patriarchate.org>.

connects with creation. Yet, in its own distinctive way, the earth unites us all: beyond any individual or collective efforts, and certainly beyond any doctrinal or racial differences. We may or may not share religious convictions or political principles. But we do share an experience of the environment: we share the air that we breathe, the water that we drink, and the ground that we tread—albeit neither always equally nor always fairly. But by some mysterious connection, that we do not always understand (and sometimes choose to ignore), the *earth* itself reminds *us* of our interconnectedness.

This is surely the deeper connection also between religion and environment. The Ecumenical Patriarch recognizes that he stands before something greater than himself, indeed something greater than his (or any) faith. Religion is what suggests a sense of permanence here – seeing and making sense of things beyond ourselves and our needs. This is why, for Bartholomew, healing a broken environment is a matter of truthfulness to God, humanity and the created order. He was the first to dare broaden the traditional concept of sin – beyond individual and social implications – to include environmental damage! Some fifteen years ago, he declared:

“To commit a crime against the natural world is a sin. For human beings to cause species to become extinct and destroy the biological diversity of God’s creation; ... to degrade the integrity of the earth by causing climate change; ... to strip the earth of its natural forests, or destroy its wetlands; ... to contaminate the earth’s waters, its land, its air, and its life – all of these are sins.”<sup>2</sup>

Religion clearly has a key role to play; and a spirituality that remains uninvolved with outward creation is ultimately uninvolved with the inward mystery too. The environment is not only a political or a technological issue; it is, as we have come to appreciate, primarily a religious and spiritual issue.

Nevertheless, when Eastern Christians speak of sin and repentance, they envisage not any legalistic spirit or sense of guilt, but rather a radical transformation of one’s worldview and lifestyle. In his now classic article, entitled “The Roots of our Ecological Crisis,” Lynn White already suspected – although in some ways neither he nor subsequent scholars have elaborated on – the truth behind this simple claim. He wrote:

“The Greek saint contemplates; the Western saint acts. The Latins ... felt that sin was *moral evil*, and that salvation was to be found in right conduct. ... The implications of Christianity for the conquest of nature would emerge more easily in the Western atmosphere.”<sup>3</sup>

You see, we call this crisis “ecological,” which is fair in so far as its results are manifest in the ecological sphere. Yet, the crisis is not first of all about ecology. It is a crisis about us; it is a crisis about the way we envisage, the way we imagine our world. It is a spiritual battle against – to quote an Eastern Christian mystic – “movements and powers within us, which are disordered, unnatural, and hostile to God’s creation.”<sup>4</sup> We are treating our planet in an inhuman, god-forsaken

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<sup>2</sup> See Alon Tal, *Speaking of Earth: Environmental Speeches that Moved the World*, New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006, 201-209. See also John Chryssavgis (ed.), *Cosmic Grace, Humble Prayer: The Ecological Vision of the Green Patriarch Bartholomew*, Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans Publishing, Revised Edition, 2009, 190.

<sup>3</sup> *Science* 155, March 1967, 1203-1207.

<sup>4</sup> St. Maximus the Confessor (580-662)

manner because we perceive it this way, because we see ourselves this way. So before we can effectively deal with environmental issues, we must change our self-image. Otherwise, we are only dealing with symptoms. An eighth-century spiritual classic of the Eastern Christian Church claims: "The whole earth is a living icon of the face of God."<sup>5</sup> We must recall that we are less than human without God, less than human without each other, and less than human without creation.

Far too often, we are sure that we have the solutions to the environmental crisis that we face without pausing long enough, without being still to listen to the earth that we have so burdened. Far too often, we tend to pursue tangible results in alternative energy or else are dissatisfied with our inability to act effectively. It helps to recall that it is our very actions that led us in the first place to the predicament we face. The aim is not simply to consider alternatives, whether political (such as cap-and-trade) or personal (such as carbon offsets). In some ways, as recently observed, these solutions are not unlike the medieval "indulgences," that result neither in any radical response to the challenge at hand nor in any real change in our lifestyle; they merely create a sense of self-complacency and promote a sense of self-sufficiency.

And here, I think, lies the heart of the problem. For we are unwilling – and, in fact, violently resist any call – to adopt more simple lives. Paradoxically, ecological correction may in fact begin with environmental in-action. First, we have to stop what we are doing. What we need is a discipline of vigilant and voluntary frugality. Yet, such is the way of humility, of learning to tread lightly and gently on this planet. We know we cannot treat people like things; it is time we learned not to treat also things like mere things. Pride is a uniquely human attribute; it belongs to Adam. Humility through simplicity can reconcile a world otherwise divided by pride; it will preserve a planet otherwise exploited by greed. If we are guilty of relentless waste in our world, it may be because we have lost this spirit of simplicity and this spirituality of compassion. The challenge is: How do I live in such a way that promotes harmony and not division? How do I live in such a way that communicates gratitude and not greed? Then, we would hear the grass grow and feel the seal's heart beat.

Ironically, the earth, too, would cooperate in this task. As Patriarch Bartholomew declared jointly with the Pope John Paul II:

"It is not too late. God's world has incredible healing powers. Within a single generation, we could steer the earth toward our children's future. Let that generation start now."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> St. John of Damascus (675-749)

<sup>6</sup> See "The Venice Declaration" in John Chryssavgis (ed.), *Cosmic Grace, Humble Prayer: The Ecological Vision of the Green Patriarch Bartholomew*, Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans Publishing, Rev. Ed., 2009, 281.