

The Orthodox Church Addresses the Climate Crisis

Excerpts from the book

ECUMENICAL PATRIARCH BARTHOLOMEW

We cannot remain satisfied with sweeping statements; we are called to direct our attention and our action to our immediate neighborhood in order to address the challenges engendered or exacerbated by climate change.

In the specific case of the Orthodox Church, this means that we are obliged first of all and above all to put our own house in order. This implies considering the impact of pollution on our faithful in regions most densely populated by Orthodox Christians. It involves responding to the need for a climate-friendly economy and energy stemming directly from the fundamental principles of our theology and tradition. Moreover, it includes reflecting critically on potential solutions - such as the European Green Deal - which aspires to a climate neutral European Union by the year 2050, in order to transform and guide our societies toward a more sustainable future for the sake of leaving behind a cleaner, safer, and fairer world.”

IRINEJ, PATRIARCH OF THE SERBIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH (+)

We have a crucial role as Orthodox Church in encouraging the world’s response to the climate and ecological crisis through Church as Body of Christ. We give a clear message for Orthodox climate leadership, focusing primarily on the Balkan Peninsula and Mediterranean, which is facing mounting challenges caused or exacerbated by climate change and the broader environmental crisis.

The experience of the entire creation (the World) as Home (of all of us), is possible exclusively and solely from that which is the Wholeness of Heaven and earth, history and the Eschaton – from the Body of Christ and in the Body of Christ, Christ’s Church, which is larger and higher and more encompassing than the world, “which surpasses Heaven itself,” which contains within herself not only the entire cosmos, not only the visible but also the invisible world, “all worlds” “life, immortality and eternity, and theandricity.” That is because graceful-ascetic knowledge of God is the source of all other human knowledge – self-knowledge (anthropology) as well as knowledge of the world (cosmology, ecology).

LAURENCE TUBIANA CEO, EUROPEAN CLIMATE FOUNDATION

We are witnessing a human-induced climate crisis as well as the 6th wave of extinction – which is not far away neither in place nor in time. All parts of the world, including the Balkans, will suffer from it; young generations aware of the gloomy prospects of the future are already awakening and demanding action. Human development in the last century imbued our actions with powers that have never been seen before in human history. This power has particularly affected temperature changes and rises in sea levels, which affect us all.

Ethical principles need to guide both the continuation of such human activity and economic development, and the measures we will need to take to adapt to climate change impacts. In view of the magnitude and novel nature of the climate crisis, we need to look to the canons of traditional ethics and values, and see how we can use and extend them for these unique circumstances. We need to look into the core values of our societies, many of which, especially in the Balkan region, have been shaped to a large extent by the Orthodox Church. In this regard, Eastern Orthodoxy can boldly contribute to a change of ethical practices and to develop a vision for the Balkan people of a more ecofriendly, human-friendly way of life. This book is providing an important contribution to this process.

MARCO LAMBERTINI
DIRECTOR GENERAL, WWF INTERNATIONAL

The health and vitality of human societies is intricately linked with the health of our planet. Paraphrasing the well-known saying, that “every text has a context,” one can say that the very context of humanity is this one planet and nothing less. Without a context, nobody can understand the true meaning of a text. Without this planet, life ceases to exist. As humanity is currently facing the unprecedented crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic, we are all alarmingly becoming aware of the far-reaching repercussions of the heavy footprint of economies and lifestyles on our planet’s natural boundaries, while the climate crisis is finally widely recognized as one of the most defining issues of our times.

As communities around the globe are adapting to the realities of the accelerating climate crisis, it is important that Church leaders support the smooth and inclusive transition from high carbon dependence towards zero carbon sustainable economies and vibrant societies. Moving away from fossil fuels, while building a healthier and brighter future for all people, within the natural boundaries of our planet’s ecosystems and climate, is a shared responsibility which world political and spiritual leaders need to uphold in universal unity, leaving aside political, ethnic or religious differences.

METROPOLITAN JOHN (ZIZIOULAS) OF PERGAMON

The Church both with her preaching and teaching, and, above all, with her very existence, can only be anxious and protest when she sees our natural environment being destroyed by human greed and human interventions. The Church, of course, does not have the legal power to impose on people respect for our natural environment, but she must exercise all its moral influence on society and, on the competent bodies of authority, starting from her own members and the faithful, to prevent and deter actions that harm the environment.

I emphasize that we need an environmental ethos. Ethos is different from ethics. Ethics is based on rules that people set in their behavior based on reason. It thus addresses the reason of man. But our relationship with the natural environment is not formed when our logic matures, but from the first moment we are born. From young children we acquire habits, which are cultivated by our family, school, etc. as ways of relationship and behavior, to which we become habituated without submitting them to our logic. From this age on, and in this way, our proper relationship with nature must be formed, we must learn to love it, to take care of it, to respect it.

METROPOLITAN IGNATIUS (GEORGAKOPOULOS) OF DEMETRIAS AND ALMYROS
Greece

Climate change is not a reality that threatens a piece of land far away from our home. It is a reality that puts at risk our own villages and cities, here in Greece as well. It suffices to refer to the unspeakable disaster that took place in the region of Attica during the last years (floods in Mandra and wildfires in Mati and Kinetta, Attica, Greece) which caused the death of a considerable number of people (over than 100) in almost a few hours. Furthermore it has become customary and not the exception to not only hear about (during the winter or summer, if one can still discern any season!) but also primarily to experience exceptional weather, like long periods of time with high temperatures, winter storms, forest fires, floods, a situation unknown some decades before, which causes incalculable problems to the local environment, climate and economy. It goes without saying then that climate change as a child of globalization not only challenges but also affects in different ways the whole planet and something should be done to reduce its consequences.

Based on the rich tradition of our faith and practice, I am definitely sure that an alternative anthropological model is required, in other words a new ethos, a new way of being, different from the dominating lifestyle which prioritizes consumption and individual eudemonism as the basic task of our narcissistic Ego over solidarity, responsibility for the neighbor, all the living beings and nature. What is needed is not simply a new political program which attempts to find the balance between the goals to be achieved and the risks to be avoided for the sake of political correctness, but an ethic that will take seriously into account the need of human beings to deeply dive into their heart seeking the true meaning for the entire world.

METROPOLITAN PAVLOS (PAPALEXIOU) OF SERVIA AND KOZANI
Greece

Shepherding, by the grace of God, a particularly ecologically burdened diocese, we are constantly confronted with the acute reflection, sometimes even the contradiction, between the Orthodox theology of creation and, the environmental problems brought about by the existing reality. More specifically, our diocese, as the most important energy source for the production of electricity in the country, has faced for decades, acute environmental problems, simultaneously with the economic growth guaranteed throughout this period by the electricity production, the jobs it offered and the its general contribution to the development of this province. [...]

However, the already announced shutdown of the factory that produces electricity through lignite has, as expected, provoked a very sharp reaction in the local community, due to its understandable socio-economic consequences. The goal “by 2023 to have withdrawn all lignite-fired thermal power plants currently in operation and its complete disconnection from the domestic power system by 2028,” announces a period of general recession, high unemployment and important social problems in our region. Consequently, the fear of tomorrow and the reactions of the social body are perfectly justified.

Of course, we need to intensify our efforts in this direction in view of the expected escalation of difficulties in our region, but at the same time, we need the appropriate readiness to deal with mental, spiritual and family problems, which usually arise, following the various social, professional and financial problems. At the same time, the basic priority of our ecclesiastical pastorate is - and should be - the information and pedagogy of our pastor, with the aim of deeply understanding the value of

creation as a gift of the Trinitarian God, its protection, its contribution to the spiritual integration of human being and its reference to its Creator.

BISHOP IGNATIJE (MIDIĆ) OF POZAREVAC AND BRANICEVO
Serbia

The consequences of pollution and destruction of nature are visible not only in nature in the form of climate changes and major natural disasters, but also when it comes to human being. As an example, we mention the situation from our immediate environment. In the field of our diocese there have been two major pollutants of nature for decades. These are the factory for obtaining and processing of iron and steel, which is located in the city of Smederevo, which has about 150,000 inhabitants, as well as the huge thermal power plant Kostolac and Drmno for the production of electricity twenty kilometers away. These two giant air pollutants, with so much waste, are becoming not only a great threat to the environment and human lives, which in some days of high humidity and low atmospheric pressure are unable to reach clean air, but also drastically affect the microclimate change in this area. In the last two decades, the winter period has absolutely no snow (which was not the case before), while precipitations are so sudden and abundant and when there should be none, that they cause large-scale floods. There are also sudden appearances of stormy winds of such destructive power that people, even the oldest ones, absolutely do not remember that something like this happened in the past on these terrains. This most likely awakened people's awareness that something serious was happening to our environment, and that is the reason why in recent years they have been so resolutely against the construction of so-called mini hydroelectric power plants on nearby rivers. The same is the case in other parts of Serbia, where associations for environmental protection are appearing more and more often. We personally work very closely with some of them, especially in the field of education of the widest possible layer of the population, all with the aim of protecting and restoring the endangered environment.

THEODOTA NANTSOU
Head of policy, WWF Greece

Environmental ethics is not a new branch of Orthodox Christian thinking. Care for the world, understood as God's creation, has deep roots in the patristic, liturgical and ascetic tradition of the Eastern Orthodox Church. Ethics and theology however, does not automatically translate into practice. Humanity, now facing the cataclysmic impacts of the climate crisis and the enormous effects of the loss of natural ecosystems and biodiversity, has made the role of the Church in actively restoring a harmonious and future-looking interaction with our environment absolutely essential.

Particularly in communities living in poverty, which also suffer the impacts of poor air quality and pollution, such as the coal regions in the Balkans, the role of the Church is of utmost importance. Caring for those persons and families that suffer and even becoming the voice for a just transition to a future of clean energy, nature-based solutions to climate change and vibrant local economies where no one is left behind, can be game-changing.

NIKOLAOS ASPROULIS
Deputy Director, Volos Academy for Theological Studies, Greece

The real challenge that lays in the heart of the current ecological crisis is the way one responds to the following basic question: "Who am I"? Climate crisis cannot be addressed without a new

understanding of human identity. A dated self-sufficient and self-referent perception of human being that does not need to relate to its surrounding setting in order to exist leads to a sharp dichotomy between man and the world. In contrast, if one defines human being in terms of relationship, in which a reference to, or rather a relation with a Thou, and It, occupies a central role, then it is easier to realize the close (ontological) dependence of human being on the other (humans, nature, or God).

Today, it is not enough for humanity simply to preserve, as a steward or oikonomos the environment. Climate change has radically put in jeopardy the very existence of the entire cosmos. Man is called to act as priest of creation, as homo eucharisticus, in order to contribute to the eschatological incorruptibility of the God's creation. At the end of time, we must offer in return the precious gift offered to us by God not as a polluted and destroyed planet but as the Eucharistic Gifts of the body of Christ in order to live forever. While "ecology is ... a matter of our esse," the offering of creation through humankind to God also makes it a matter of "our bene esse."

SVETO RIBOLOFF
Professor, St. Clement University of Sofia, Bulgaria

Certainly, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church has to do more in Bulgarian society because of the new challenges of the third decade of the 21st century. Bulgarian hierarchy needs to activate missionary programs in the problematic regions. For instance, until 2030 the Coal Power Plants, according to the EU Green Deal, have to be closed and many people in the region of North Thrace in Bulgaria will stay unemployed. Over the last few years, a new problem has appeared with the Waste Incineration Plants in cities like Sofia, Rousse and Pernik which have started polluting the earth during the winter. The health conditions in Sofia, particularly, deteriorated significantly during the last two winters. NGOs started independent researches because of the inactivity of state bodies that throws a shadow on relationships of some state servants with the big business bosses. It appears that a significant part of the garbage in those plants comes from Italy. Lately protests in Sofia and also in other big cities have also been related to the topic in question. It is a widespread rumor in Bulgarian society that these Waste Incineration Plants work in collaboration with companies run by Italian crooks. Unfortunately, on its highest-level BOC keeps silent on this problem, perhaps because of the close relationships between a few bishops and the PM B. Borissov.

THYMIO PAPAYANNIS
Architect, President Emeritus, WWF Greece

In our days, climate change is proving to be the main threat to humanity. In spite of lengthy debates at an international official scale, as well as scientific disagreements, its impacts are already visible, clearly documented and cannot be disputed. The ice cover of the poles is melting rapidly, leading to sea level rise and opening new marine corridors in pristine parts of our planet. Freak climatic events are becoming more frequent causing human losses and severe economic damages. Oceans are warming, threatening habitats, species, and livelihoods. The survival of certain wildlife species has become precarious. De-forestation rates are increasing as freshwater availability is being reduced in other parts of the world leading to desertification and famine, which is some of the strongest motives for immigration.

Despite such strong signals, the response of the international community has been up to now slow and uncoordinated, resulting from the actions of powerful economic lobbies, and the negative policies of some of the major countries, led until currently by the United States and not only. At the global level, the situation matures at a glacial pace. The unfortunate result has been an inability to control effectively the rise of temperature at a moderate level, while uncertainty persists. The world's major

religions and the Christian churches have played a marginal role in the debate, although climate change is modifying radically a key parameter of the Creation, which is the conservation of the natural environment, and is menacing the wellbeing and the survival of species, including eventually the human race.

ZVEZDAN KALMAR
Centre for Ecology and Sustainable Development, Serbia

Christians do not judge (and in that sense the description of the world situation in this article is not presented as a judgment), but at the same time God wants us to judge and make a Just judgment by saying: “stop Judging by outward appearances, and start judging justly (John 7,24) which means that while doing all we can to change ourselves through the power of the Spirit, cleansing us from our wrong doings, we do actually need to stand firm and to name things with real names. This also means that we will need to stand up for those in need, to fight for those who suffer injustice, who suffer from pollution, destructive industrial and other practices, that we will need to stand and face not only individuals but moreover the state if it is acting destructively. This should not be in hatred, anathematizing but moreover in Love of Christ, since everyone is sinning and everyone needs a savior. We are not better than others and that is why when we act we need to be fully dedicated to being led by the assistance and wisdom of God but also with the brevity of the children of God.

There should be zero tolerance for all the fiscal, technological, legal and institutional manipulations that produce pollution, destruction of “nature,” and the massive dodging of financial and other obligations (rules) thus leading to the situation where any and all positive actions always come up against a wall of lack of resources.

Fr IOANNIS ECONOMIDES
Priest, mathematician, St Spyridon Church, Oinofyta, Greece

The ecological problem is the most serious hardship humanity faces today. It is the essential problem of our life as it relates to its core: it is the way we consume the sacred world of which we are only a dependent part. Now the traditional criteria for the moral characterization of human actions recede in importance and relevance in view of the criterion of the environmental footprint. The dynamic of this decline is exponential. Nowadays a religion, a church, a theology that does not evaluate the ecological problem in this way has no reason to exist.

A recent UN report (The human cost of disasters: an overview of the last 20 years) states that our planet is becoming an inhospitable hell for millions of people due to the natural disasters caused by anthropogenic climate change. Indeed, the flames of hell today are where the fossil fuels burn and intensify with the rise of the average global temperature. Its pollution is in our uncontrolled landfills where we recklessly get rid of the waste of our frantic consumer mania. The devil himself is the one who whispers in our ear to not only recklessly scatter the chemical fertilizers on our farms but also to buy the materials for our fasting food packed in disposable plastic in the supermarket. The devil's pleasurable amusement, human pain, culminates in disease and poverty caused by pollution, degradation and destruction of natural resources.

This is the most serious lack of social justice since the consequences, although ultimately affecting us all, primarily and to a significant degree affect the financially weak. It is more than obvious that the Christian eventually ceases to be a Christian if he remains a passive observer or even an accomplice to the sufferings caused by the environmental crisis. He must identify and fight every evil that tries to take over the world.