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Southern California Ecumenical Council
Faith and Order - "Global Warming: Eastern Orthodox Perspective"

*"The use of atomic and nuclear forces of nature for war is an insult to creation and Creator, as is over-consumption of any kind, which burdens the natural environment with pollutants, which leads to climate change and global warming and an imbalance in the natural order, with all that implies."*¹

-His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople

Time Magazine recently included His All Holiness, Bartholomeos I, the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, together with the Dalai Lama, in the "Time 100" list of the world's most influential persons (May 12, 2008) as the only two international religious figures. Patriarch Bartholomew, spokesperson for Orthodox Christians worldwide, was included for his continuing and vocal support of protecting the global environment. Often called the "Green Patriarch," (long before the term "green" was being used everywhere) Patriarch Bartholomew believes ecological questions are really spiritual issues. He decries the breach between the mystical life in Christ and the practical and active care of creation – the two are inseparable. His main thrust is that the individualism of western culture has caused a failure, in cosmic proportions, to see the world as a gift from God, and to see ourselves as ontologically related to every creation of God.

There is no scientific consensus on the cause of climate warming trends. There are many scientists who attribute global warming as a symptom of human industrialization, and vocal climatologists and atmospheric physicists who insist that changes in the last century are consistent with centuries-long naturally-occurring trends. His All Holiness emphasizes the former, but neither blame nor the cause of global warming are his principal *foci*. His words warrant quoting directly:

We are as human beings, responsible for creation; but we have behaved as if we own creation. The problem of the environment is primarily neither an ethical nor a moral issue. It is an ontological issue, demanding a new way of being as well as a new way of behaving.²

I have also learned that the crisis we are facing in our world is not primarily ecological. It is a crisis concerning the way we envisage or imagine the world. We are treating our planet in an inhuman, godless manner precisely because we fail to see it as a gift inherited from above; it is our obligation to receive, respect, and in turn hand on this gift to future generations. Therefore, before we can effectively deal with problems of our environment, we must change the way we perceive the world. Otherwise we are simply dealing with symptoms, not with their causes.³

So let us acquire a "eucharistic spirit" and an "ascetic ethos," bearing in mind that everything in the natural world, whether great or small, has its importance *within the universe and for the life of the world*; nothing whatsoever is useless or contemptible. Let us regard ourselves as responsible before God for every living creature and for the whole of natural creation. Let us treat everything with proper love and utmost care.⁴

Beyond the critical concerns with the kind of planet that we will pass down to future generations, there are immediate ethical and humanitarian needs around the world for which we know the cause and currently have the technology to rectify (i.e. shortages of clean water, adequate food, medicine.) His All Holiness writes: "It is evident, then, that all of our ecological activity is ultimately measured by its effect on people, especially the poor."⁵ We should indeed heed his words and "treat everything with proper love and utmost care." In doing so we begin to correct *every* human-caused destructive trend that affects our environment but we also begin to correct the flawed vision of our own standing before the God of inexhaustible goodness and mercy, who has given us His creation to tend, not to own.

¹ "Encyclical of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew for the day of the protection of natural environment" 1/09/06, World Council of Churches. Internet: <http://www.oikoumene.org/index.php?id=2512>.

² His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew. *Encountering the Mystery: Understanding Orthodox Christianity Today*, (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 116.

³ *Ibid.*, 118.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 117-8.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 112.