
The Earthday Icon
5. *The Christian Church's
Ethical Perspective on Creation*



*Common Crisis,
Common Hope*

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Common Crisis,

In the last 30 years much has been said and written about the environmental crisis by the Eastern Orthodox Church. In the last few years the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches have written documents on Creation in Crisis.

It seems that at last the Christian Church is tuning into the precious gift of our Cosmos and the place of planet Earth within this, especially the importance of the environment for humanity's wellbeing.

Christianity should have much to say on this issue if it truly believes in the Creation of the world by God for the enrichment of humankind. Christians believe they and all human beings are co-creators with the Divine and as such have an important mission to create a world worthy of God and humankind.

The Christian narrative through Creation myth highlights the problem as we see here from Patriarch Bartholomew at the 1999 Budapest Symposium III:

“Of course, after the original sin of our forebears, nature became subject to corruption and humanity subject to sin. Nevertheless, through our Lord Jesus Christ, God renewed His covenant with humanity and nature awaits its liberation from bondage and corruption Romans8:21. However, we, and especially we Christians who consider love to be our fundamental duty and an element of our being, have an obligation to make sure that our actions do not become harmful for our fellow men. Pollution and all harmful influences on our environment more generally have an adverse effect on the lives of our fellow human beings, and they must be avoided.”¹

Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew has been internationally recognized for his leadership and initiatives in addressing the theological, ethical, and practical questions in relation to the critical environmental issues.

Pope Francis in his Encyclical Letter 'LAUDATO SI' on Care for our Common Home 2015, has also been a leading light in this environmental crisis. He states:

“This sister (Earth) now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her. We have come to see ourselves as her lords and masters, entitled to plunder her at will. The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life. This is why the earth herself, burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor; she “groans in travail” (Rom 8:22).”²

The World Council of Churches too is conscious of the crisis that Creation faces because of human greed, exploitation, and neglect.

1 P188 On Earth as in Heaven. Ecological Vision and Initiatives of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew. John Chryssavgis Editor.

2 Pope Francis in his Encyclical Letter 'LAUDATO SI' Care for our Common Home 2015

“As we celebrate, we empathize with those parts of Creation—human and non-human—that are groaning because of human crimes against Creation.”³

All we see in relation to our world, according to Rev Dr. Olav Fykse secretary of WCC 2016 is:

- ***A morally decaying scenario.***
- ***Our attitude and behaviour towards Creation obscures our calling as God’s co-operators.***
- ***Our propensity to interrupt the world’s delicate and balanced ecosystems.***
- ***Our insatiable desire to manipulate and control the planet’s limited resources.***⁴

On the 1st September 2017 a joint Message for the World Day of Prayer for Creation was given by Pope Francis & Patriarch Bartholomew

“Our human dignity and welfare are deeply connected to our care for the whole Creation.’ However,” in the meantime”, the history of the world presents a very different context. Our greed for limitless profit in markets. All these have alienated us from the original purpose of Creation. We no longer respect nature as a shared gift; instead, we regard it as a private possession. We no longer associate with nature in order to sustain it; instead, we lord over it to support our own constructs.”⁵

Common Hope

The fact that many of the churches are at last engaging in the Environmental issue is encouraging. The leading light in this respect has been Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew. He has been called the Green Patriarch by former vice president of the USA. Al Gore, who himself was a recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize for his environmental activism.

During an interview with the Norwegian newspaper Tagbladet in 2002 Patriarch Bartholomew said

“The Orthodox Church has always been conscious of the unity of humanity with the natural environment. Such awareness derives from the universal concept of the world and the inviolable interdependence of the parts with the whole, and visa versa... The disruption of this relationship that we observe in the last years but especially in most recent years, as well as the burdening of the natural environment, explain and justify the increased significance that we attribute to ecological related issues. For these are not simply local and regional but in fact concern the entire planet and its immediate environs, threatening the regular function of our natural environment as well as the very survival of humanity and other living organisms.”⁶

This concern for the environment within the Orthodox Church dates back to the mid 1980’s. Then in 1989 the late Patriarch Demetrios called for Orthodox Christians to celebrate and commemorate September 1st of each year as a day dedicated to the preservation of the natural environment.

³ <http://www.letallcreationpraise.org/season-of-creation>

⁴ <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/what-we-do/climate-change/time-for-creation>

⁵ Joint Message for World Day of Prayer for Creation was given by Pope Francis & Patriarch Bartholomew

⁶ P315 On Earth as in Heaven

The Roman Catholic Church has been prompted by Pope Francis to engage in this critical issue.

*14. I urgently appeal, then, for a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet. We need a conversation which includes everyone, since the environmental challenge we are undergoing, and its human roots, concern and affect us all. The worldwide ecological movement has already made considerable progress and led to the establishment of numerous organizations committed to raising awareness of these challenges. Regrettably, many efforts to seek concrete solutions to the environmental crisis have proved ineffective, not only because of powerful opposition but also because of a more general lack of interest. Obstructionist attitudes, even on the part of believers, can range from denial of the problem to indifference, nonchalant resignation or blind confidence in technical solutions. We require a new and universal solidarity. As the bishops of Southern Africa have stated: "Everyone's talents and involvement are needed to redress the damage caused by human abuse of God's Creation". All of us can cooperate as instruments of God for the care of Creation, each according to his or her own culture, experience, involvements and talents."*⁷

In Caring for Our Common Home: An Ecumenical and Inter-religious Concern. World Council of Churches. 02 Dec 2016. A document issued by the World Council of Churches, affirming Pope Francis' encyclical, Laudato Si, Rev Dr. Olav Fykse secretary of WCC said in 2016

*"The World Council of Churches, as a fellowship of 350 Orthodox, Protestant, and Anglican churches representing half a billion people, has also spoken in many of its documents during the last four decades about climate change and eco-justice, on the earth as home for all living creatures, living in different spaces or habitats but linked to each other in a web of relationships. The human community is placed within the wider community of the earth, which is embedded in God's household of life. Economy – the order of the house, ecology – the logic of the house, and oikoumene – the inhabited earth and household of life that we share, these concepts all refer to the same Greek root, oikos – the house or the common home. The WCC began to promote the vision of a just and sustainable society already in 1974. Since 1983 the WCC has energized the churches' witness for the care for Creation through a broad process on justice, peace and the integrity of Creation."*⁸

In the Encyclical 'Laudato Si, Pope Francis expresses what for him and the Church is an interesting perspective 'Climate as a Common good.' He writes:

"23. The climate is a common good, belonging to all and meant for all. At the global level, it is a complex system linked to many of the essential conditions for human life. A very solid scientific consensus indicates that we are presently witnessing a disturbing warming of the climatic system. In recent decades this warming has been accompanied by a constant rise in the sea level and, it would appear, by an increase of extreme weather events, even if a scientifically determinable cause cannot be assigned to each particular phenomenon. Humanity is called to recognize the need for changes of lifestyle, production and consumption, in order to combat this warming or at least the human causes which produce or aggravate it... The problem is aggravated by a model of

⁷ Pope Francis in his Encyclical Letter 'LAUDATO SI' Care for our Common Home 2015

⁸ In Caring for Our Common Home: An Ecumenical and Inter-religious Concern. World Council of Churches.

development based on the intensive use of fossil fuels, which is at the heart of the worldwide energy system.”⁹

The WCC wrote in the build up to the UN Climate Change Conference (COP21) in Paris scheduled for 2015:

“The Executive Committee of the World Council of Churches (WCC) met in Bogis-Bossey, Switzerland, on 13-18 November 2015, in the lead-up to the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP 21) in Paris on 30 November-11 December 2015. After more than 20 years of UN negotiations, this major conference has to achieve a legally binding and universal agreement on climate, with the aim of keeping global warming below 2°C.

The Executive Committee affirms the longstanding ecumenical commitment to promoting effective intergovernmental, social and individual action to address climate change, as a key challenge for human stewardship of God’s precious and unique Creation. The Assembly acknowledged that climate change is one of today’s most challenging global threats affecting especially the most vulnerable people, but that it has lost priority in public and political agendas and that climate change negotiations at the international level have not realized the stated goals.”¹⁰

Rev. Dr Olav Fykse secretary to the WWC expressed hope in the Paris Summit.

“There are reasons to hope. All over Europe and in other regions of the world, people participated in pilgrimages of climate – justice that the WCC inspired and initiated as an element of the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace, which is the overarching programme emphasis of the WCC. We could show the close cooperation and common message of many religious leaders of all major faith communities. We could present 1,780,000 signatures, including those of many young people, calling for a fair and just agreement. During and after COP 21, many more organizations and even a big insurance company went for divestment in fossil-fuel industries and re-investment in renewables and clean energy production.”¹¹

In the light of the Paris Summit the following statement was made by the WCC:

- 1. “The time has come to do the right thing and to leave the fossil-based economic development path behind us.***
- 2. It is time for those who shape the moral discourse about sustainable values for the earth as our common home and the human family to point more to the possibilities existing presently to do what serves the future of our planet”¹²***

Emmanuel Macron President of the French Republic spoke in April 2018 to the American Congress in the hope that this country would not opt out of the global discussion on the Environment as they had in Paris. He said:

⁹ Pope Francis in his Encyclical Letter ‘LAUDATO SI’ Care for our Common Home 2015

¹⁰ <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/executive-committee/2015-nov/statement-on-cop21>

¹¹ Caring for Our Common Home: An Ecumenical and Interreligious Concern Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit WCC General Secretary Geneva, 15. January 2016

¹² <https://www.oikoumene.org>

"We are killing our planet. Let us face it: There is no Planet B." ¹³

It is reassuring to see world leaders engaged in the Environmental Crisis facing Planet Earth. Up-until-recently it has been the prerogative of pressure groups and religious leaders like Pope Francis in his Encyclical 'Laudato Si' who clearly states:

"Doomsday predictions can no longer be met with irony or disdain. We may well be leaving to coming generations debris, desolation and filth. The pace of consumption, waste and environmental change has so stretched the planet's capacity that our contemporary lifestyle, unsustainable as it is, can only precipitate catastrophes, such as those which even now periodically occur in different areas of the world. The effects of the present imbalance can only be reduced by our decisive action, here and now. We need to reflect on our accountability before those who will have to endure the dire consequences."¹⁴

For Patriarch Bartholomew, the challenge in the light of the environment, faced by the ecumenical movement are twofold:

1. ***"The need to reclaim the crucial and critical interconnection between doctrine and action, between faith and order, between theology and ethos. What we believe determines how we behave. The way we pray is reflected upon the way that we treat our neighbour and our environment. There can be no separation between the image that we hold of our God, and the world, or ourselves and the impact that we have upon other people and the natural environment."***
2. ***Churches are called to remember the essence and source of their existence and teaching. Therefore, we are invited to recall the original and essential purpose of the church's being and life within a divided and disturbed world."***¹⁵

What humans believe does determine how they behave. For the Christian this is packaged as mission. The mission of the church concerning belief in Creation is to nurture the environment and to look after for it, to actively participate in all initiatives to honour God's Creation, from recycling to 'green' sustainable investment in renewable energy. But, so too it is the church authorities' mission to integrate Creation into the Liturgical Life of the Church, so that the Christian community can see the importance of such an endeavour, enabling Christians to realise that they are pilgrims with a mission, not tourists, on this Earth.

Conclusion

"The future can exist only when we understand the universe as composed of subjects to be communed with, not as objects to be exploited." — Thomas Berry ¹⁶

The created world itself is not an "object". It is not an "artifact"

"But an instrument through which the divine life becomes perceptible to itself." ¹⁷

¹³ WATCH: French President Macron addresses Congress on climate change. [nbcnews.com/2FfWZ7v](https://www.nbcnews.com/2FfWZ7v)

¹⁴ Pope Francis in his Encyclical Letter 'LAUDATO SI' Care for our Common Home 2015 No161

¹⁵ On Heaven as in Earth

¹⁶ Thomas Berry, The Great Work: Our Way into the Future (Three Rivers Press: 1999), x-xi.

¹⁷ Richard Rohr's Daily Meditation. From the Center for Action and Contemplation Week 8 Creation.

Humanists;

“Hold that experiences occur inside us, that we ought to find within ourselves the meaning of all that happens, thereby infusing the universe with meaning.”¹⁸

However, today’s moto is;

“If you experience something – record it. If you record something – upload it. If you upload something – share it.”¹⁹

Human experiences today are not in themselves valued, what is valued is;

“Turning these experiences into free-flowing data.”²⁰

The selfie of ‘me and a panda’ is not about the experience with the living world and how I feel, because the first action is to look for the smartphone, take the picture, then post it on Facebook. This is then followed by regular visits to Facebook to see how many ‘likes’ have been received. In this way the human experience is simply equated to data patterns. Consequently humans are encouraged by this behaviour not to listen to themselves, but to the external ‘Internet-of – All-Things’²¹. That analyses how you feel by collecting all your data.

Is the ‘Internet-of-all-things’ the god of today? The Omnipotent, Omniscient and Omnipresent god Omni is the Latin root, meaning ‘all’. In this context ‘Internet-of-all-things’ is a network that knows all, sees all and hopes we will believe all. According to Harari this is payback time for Homo Sapiens. This network threatens to do to humans what humans have done to all other animals. How has this happened? In his book *Homo Deus. A History of Tomorrow* he writes:

“Over the course of history humans created a global network. For thousands of years this inflated human pride and prejudices. Since humans fulfilled the most important functions in the network, it was easy for us to take the credit for the network’s achievements, and so to see ourselves as the apex of Creation. The lives and experiences of all other animals were undervalued because they fulfilled far less important functions, and whenever an animal ceased to fulfil any function at all, it went extinct. However once we humans lose our functional importance to the network, we will discover that we are not the apex of Creation after all. The yardstick that we ourselves have enshrined will condemn us to join the mammoths... Looking back, humanity will be just a ripple within the cosmic dataflow.”²²

Harari is keen to point out that this scenario is to be understood as a possibility, not a prophecy. The inevitable rise of AI²³ and bio-technology will transform the world as we know it today. Pope Francis in the Encyclical ‘Laudato Si’ is keen to point out that technoscience if well directed can and is an important way of improving the quality of human life, but when misused it can have a devastating effect and wield a tremendous power.

¹⁸ P450 *Homo Deus. A History of Tomorrow.*

¹⁹ P450 *ibid*

²⁰ P450 *ibid*

²¹ Internet-of-all-things, a phrase used in *Homo Deus*

²² P460 *Homo Deus. A History of Tomorrow*

²³ Artificial Intelligence

“There is a tendency to believe that every increase in power means “an increase of ‘progress’ itself”, an advance in “security, usefulness, welfare and vigour; ...an assimilation of new values into the stream of culture”,[83] as if reality, goodness and truth automatically flow from technological and economic power as such. The fact is that “contemporary man has not been trained to use power well”,[84] because our immense technological development has not been accompanied by a development in human responsibility, values and conscience... The risk is growing day by day that man will not use his power as he should”; in effect, “power is never considered in terms of the responsibility of choice which is inherent in freedom” since its “only norms are taken from alleged necessity, from either utility or security”.[85] But human beings are not completely autonomous. Our freedom fades when it is handed over to the blind forces of the unconscious, of immediate needs, of self-interest, and of violence. In this sense, we stand naked and exposed in the face of our ever-increasing power, lacking the wherewithal to control it. We have certain superficial mechanisms, but we cannot claim to have a sound ethics, a culture and spirituality genuinely capable of setting limits and teaching clear-minded self-restraint.”²⁴

What must remain important and is an imperative is the relational aspect of Homo Sapiens.

Individualism has also been fed by Biblical scripture. The individual is told they ‘are made in the image of God’, they are ‘precious in God’s eyes’, they are ‘Temples of the Holy Spirit’. This all substantiates that ‘God created them’. Human beings were created not to be just individuals, but humanity, humanity on a pilgrimage engaging with each other and engaging with the planet on which they walk. Anthropocentrism is not an option according to the Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church.

***“The Catechism clearly and forcefully criticizes a distorted anthropocentrism: “Each creature possesses its own particular goodness and perfection... Each of the various creatures, willed in its own being, reflects in its own way a ray of God’s infinite wisdom and goodness. Man must therefore respect the particular goodness of every creature, to avoid any disordered use of things”.*²⁵**

As Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew states:

***“The Church teaches that it is the destiny of humankind to restore the proper relationship between God and the world, just as it was in the Garden of Eden.”*²⁶**

This is a tall order. It requires that humanity reaches a point of maturity in relation to one another and the environment. It requires that humanity acknowledges how inhumanely it has behaved towards the natural environment. Many would say that this is impossible, this is no longer relevant. We have seen that humanity’s ability to believe in a ‘imagined order’ is an imperative requirement to its survival. I believe that the ‘imagined order’ ingrained in humanity, Creation, is worth looking at again not just for the survival of Planet Earth but also for the survival of humanity.

²⁴ Pope Francis in his Encyclical Letter ‘LAUDATO SI’ Care for our Common Home 2015 No. 105

²⁵ Pope Francis in his Encyclical Letter ‘LAUDATO SI’ Care for our Common Home 2015 No. 69

²⁶ P34 On earth as in Heaven.

“We must take time to listen to the voice of Creation. And to do this, we must first be silent. Then, if we are honest with ourselves, we must search for ways to restrain our selfish desires and restrict our harmful attitude that has depleted and destroyed the natural resources of our planet.” ²⁷

This paper verbalises my views, however, in silence before the ‘Earthday Icon’ we are invited to stand and profess our faith in nature and in Creation and then move on to action to redress the environmental crisis in whatever way we can. I hope the ‘Earthday Icon’ will be a place of silent reflection and a spring board for action.

Patriarch Bartholomew reminds us:

“Nature is a book, open wide for all to read and learn. It tells a unique story; it unfolds a profound mystery; it relates an extraordinary harmony and balance, which is independent and complementary.” ²⁸

As we saw at the beginning of this paper the icon is a window through which we see divine intention. I hope this ‘Earthday Icon’ is a window through which a unique story unfolds, allowing us to glimpse the profound mystery of Creation and the place of humanity within this narrative.

According to Leonid Ouspensky in his book *Theology of The Icon Volume Two* he writes:

“One of the greatest discoveries of the twentieth century is the icon, as much from the artistic as from the spiritual point of view. Let us recall that the discovery occurred on the eve of the great historic upheavals: the First World War, and the wars and revolutions that followed it... it was precisely during this ‘turbulent period’ that the icon appeared as the supreme treasure of human art. For some, it represented the precious inheritance of a distant past. For others, it was an object of aesthetic delight. Still others began dimly to perceive the meaning of the icon, and in its light, the significance of contemporary events... It is precisely in times of disasters that one glimpses the meaning of modern catastrophes in the light of the icon’s spiritual power.” ²⁹

²⁷ P 346-347 On earth as in Heaven.

²⁸ P349 ibid

²⁹ P463 Leonid Ouspensky. *Theology of The Icon Volume Two*

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