



RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL PERSPECTIVES



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Any effective response to ecological crisis calls for collaboration of all parties involved.

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The crisis we face is – we all now know and we all now admit – not primarily ecological. It has less to do with the environment and more to do with us. In many ways, it has less to do with spending and more to do with spirituality. It is

a crisis concerning the way we imagine and interact with the world. And in addressing this challenge, the world of faith can prove a powerful and persuasively in addressing it. We are treating our planet in an inhumane, godless manner because we fail to see it as a sacred gift. This means that, unless we radically change the way we perceive the world, we will continue to deal with symptoms, not their causes.

I believe that, in our relationship with creation, we are called to acknowledge and affirm our interconnectedness with the rest of the world. That is

what I like to refer to as the ecumenical imperative of creation care. This interconnectedness reminds us that, in a very peculiar and profound way, the earth unites us all – before and beyond any religious, political, racial, or other differences. We may or may not share doctrinal convictions or ethnic cultures. But we definitely share an experience of the natural environment: the air that we breathe, the water that we drink, the ground that we tread – albeit neither always equally nor always fairly.

The earth is what we all have in common; the earth is what we are made of and what we live from. Therefore, we cannot damage it without damaging those with whom we share it. By some mysterious connection that we do not always recognize (and sometimes choose to disregard), the earth reminds us of our fundamental calling to be humble and sensitive. That is arguably our greatest source of hope and joy.

If there is something we have learned from the ecological crisis, it is that our world constitutes a seamless whole, that our problems are universally shared—that no initiative or institution, no nation or corporation, neither science nor technology, can address this chal-

have often construed these phrases as excusing and exonerating their exploitation of the earth's resources. How convenient it is that these same Christians omit or forget the verse between these two phrases, where Christ clarifies: "I am not asking you, Father, to take [my disciples] out of the world, but to protect them from evil." (John 17.15)

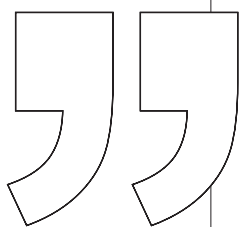
In order, however, to think and act like this, we must recognize that the earth is not something *else*, something *other* than or *external* to us. It *is* us – our body, our history, and our destiny. To paraphrase the popular refrain, we *are* the earth, we *are* the environment, we *are* creation. In this respect, the ecological crisis is compelling not as a vision for the future. As former co-chair of the IPCC Martin Parry once put it: "We are all used to talking about these impacts coming in the lifetimes of our children and grandchildren. Now we know that it's us." We need to address climate change as if confronting our very selves and our very lives—indeed our very survival. Otherwise, as science has long warned us and as current experience has made abundantly clear to us, ecological justice will follow suit with mathematical precision sooner or later; or, perhaps more accurately, sooner than later.

Far too often, however, we are sure that we have the solutions to the crisis that we face without first being still to listen to the earth that we have so burdened and blemished. We prefer to pursue tangible results in alternative energy or else are satisfied with more sustainable growth. Let us not forget that it is our actions that led us in the first place to the situation we are facing. In his now classic article on the roots of the ecological crisis, Lynn White Jr. already suspected – though he did not actually elaborate on – this truth:

The Greek saint [he wrote over half a century ago] 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.

The present ecological crisis is not only the result of bad judgment or vicious greed on the part of some; it is largely a result of human effort and successful development. Nor should we somehow presume we are "good Samaritans" when religious believers and ideologies have long associated with "highway robbers."

Paradoxically, despite or precisely because of the urgency of the ecological crisis, ecological change, correction and conversion may begin with environmental inaction. It is not the inaction of inertia or indifference, but the discipline of silence and vigilance. It is a detachment that allows us to look at our world more humbly, to tread on our planet more lightly. This is precisely where the role and responsibility of



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lenge alone. Any effective response calls for convergence and collaboration among civil leaders and religious believers, scientific thinkers and technological innovators, as well as all people of goodwill. What we desperately need is a model of cooperation, not a methodology of competition. We can no longer continue on an adversarial or partisan path, but instead learn to care and share—what in religious parlance we would call love and compassion.

This is where the religious worldview converges with scientific research. For, if we consider ourselves as the center and meaning of the universe, then we are likely to search for meaning by scratching out an existence on this world and by exploiting the resources of this planet. But if we have a broader image of the universe, then the world ceases to be something I observe objectively and becomes something of which I am a vital part. In this larger panorama, I am no longer a stranger or threat to the world, but an ally and friend. This is how I interpret the Christian identity of being "in the world" but not "of the world" in the Gospel of John (17.14 and 16) How tragic it is that Christians

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religion can prove invaluable. Drained of dogmatism and fanaticism, religion can link us mysteriously to the most ancient secrets of humankind and the universe.

There is a story in the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* that relates how the devil once asked a monk, who looked like he was doing nothing: "What are you doing here?" The monk replied: "I am just *keeping* this place." This reminds me of the divine commandment given to Adam and Eve, "to till and keep the earth" (Gen. 2.15)-that I like to translate more literally as "serve and preserve the earth." And in every Divine Liturgy in the Orthodox Church, the deacon stands in the middle of the church and exclaims: "Let us stand in goodness; let us stand in awe." This sense of "goodness" reminds me of Genesis, when God looked upon creation and said: "Indeed, it is very good." (Gen. 1.31)

Before we can *act* responsibly, we are called to keep and preserve, to stop and see the world differently from the perspective not of what we *want* but what the world *needs*. But this will take no less than a crusade by religious leaders to force change among our political leaders, a movement as critically urgent and morally imperative as any campaign for fundamental human and civil rights, a movement that ultimately demands global service and personal sacrifice.

And here, I think, lies the heart of the problem. The truth is that we are unwilling to adopt simpler lives. If we are guilty of relentless waste, it is because we have lost the spirituality of simplicity and frugality. Again, at least to a large extent, the Christian church has regrettably opted for a more selfish, narcissistic worldview. Proof of this is that the almost two billion followers of Jesus, "who had no place to lay his head" (Matt. 8.20) and taught us "not to store up treasures on earth" (Matt. 6.19), today control more than two-thirds of the earth's resources and are three times better off than their non-Christian neighbors.

Still, for some reason, we are the ones doing the "deep ecology" thinking, and we are the ones refusing either to assume responsibility or else alter our patterns. In an article criticizing Pope Francis' *Laudato Si'*, R. R. Reno, an American Catholic and editor of *First Things*, asserted:

It won't do to blame our difficulties on "those who consume and destroy," or to insinuate, as Francis so often does, that the rich and powerful stand in the way of ecological ideals and a just social order. This is cheap populism that falsifies reality. The global ecological movement is a rich country phenomenon funded and led by the One Percent.

The challenge is: How do I live in such a way that promotes harmony, not division? How do I live in such a way that communicates gratitude or generosity, not greed or arrogance? Because when we begin to understand that climate change is not just one in a long list of problems confronting politicians, we gain new insight and new perspective. Then, foreign policy looks quite different; then, threats to homeland security can be met by shipping technology instead of shipping weapons. Then, even the economy looks radically different; then, we can abandon the urge for unbridled expansion – for riches without risk and profit without price – and instead focus on the sustainability we so desperately need.

Mystics have always taught – what we have now learned all too painfully – that we are intimately and inextricably bound up with the history and destiny of our world. In my own tradition, in the seventh century, Maximus the Confessor spoke of the world as a "cosmic liturgy," a magnificent altar on which human beings worship in thanksgiving and a sacred song where the sun and moon, the trees and birds, praise God. And Isaac of Syria prayed for "a merciful heart, burning with love for all of creation: for humans, birds, and beasts." We have to recover this spirit of inclusion and spirituality of compassion, which allow us to see the world as God would see it and as God would have us see it. And if God saw the world as "very good" on that sixth day of creation, then we too can begin to sense in our world the promise of beauty and to see the world in its unfathomable interrelatedness. Then, we *shall* hear the grass grow and feel the seal's heart beat.

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