Theodota Nantsou and Nikolaos Asproulis (eds.), *The Orthodox Church Addresses the Climate Crisis*, Athens & Volos, WWF Greece & Volos Academy Publications 2021, 129 p., ISBN: 978-618-5375-11-9

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Vital and topical questions regarding the environment, nature and creation have taken a central role in world politics over the last few decades. While these issues are neglected by some, usually the most powerful states, the overall consensus of the international community is that *something* has to be done. The most difficult aspect has precisely been the general failure to agree on what and how these issues should be addressed practically. While agreements have been signed, like the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, the 1992 Convention on Biological Diversity and the European Union's Green Deal, their implementation has been far from flawless, going as far as some member countries even leaving these agreements completely.¹ Opposition to address the environmental issues is usually based on fear, often legitimate, of great economic consequences of some of the measures, unemployment being one such major potential consequence. It is because of all the above-mentioned that World Wildlife Fund (WWF) Greece and the Volos Academy has taken upon themselves to publish a collection of articles addressing these issues from the perspective of the Orthodox Church as it relates (mostly) to the Balkan region. Such an initiative, before anything else is to be said about it, should be praised, applauded and supported by all people of goodwill. Every such publication that is willing to address difficult issues in light of the teaching of the Church, is usually the catalyst that starts discussions and hopefully eventually also leads to a change in the approach of many. While not perfect, it is very much needed.

From the outset of the publication, we are met with introductions that attempt to justify and explain why this collection of articles exists and why it is necessary for them to exist. The introduction is around thirty-five pages² long and split among six authors. Patriarchs Bartholomew of Constantinople and the recently reposed Irinej of Serbia provide solid statements on the topic from an Orthodox perspective. Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, called often the Green Patriarch and being the first among equals in the Orthodox Church, has in his actions and examples on the ques-

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¹ <https://thehill.com/policy/energy-environment/335955-trump-pulls-us-out-of-paris-climate-deal>, last accessed March 9, 2021.

² Almost one-third of the entire publication when excluding the appendix.

tions of ecology showed a path that should be followed by all in the Church, as this has been a bright and positive highlight of his service as Patriarch. Other authors in the introduction, most notably Marco Lambertini, WWF Director General, provide a much more political and secular approach to the issue, which is neither negative nor a surprise in itself.

Therefore, already in the introduction, we are met by a clash of two (at least) perspectives on the issue at hand; one secular and the other spiritual. It seems this is done on purpose by the editors and it mostly works out well. It is generally not a clash in the negative sense, rather an attempt to include both so as to find a solution that both can accept. The almost constant reminder of “the Paris Agreement” and “the EU Green Deal” makes it at times seem as though the right options are already there, and the Church should provide an input that supports the already-established path, and not offer or even contribute to the forging of one, especially as none of the later more theological articles cares to in any serious way examine the Paris Agreement or the EU Green Deal.

Excluding the introductions and appendixes, the book has ten articles. We will not review all of them separately. Rather, we will mention four we consider highlights more in-depth and summarize the rest.

The very first article in the book and the first we will highlight is an interview with Metropolitan John Zizioulas of Pergamon. Zizioulas has contributed to many articles and publications on this topic and is a highly respected theologian of the modern era.

The interview (or rather it seems a part of it) provided for us is a very good basic introduction to what the Orthodox Church believes in this question and what its role should be. The main takeaway from this interview is the very well-articulated statement by Zizioulas about the sacredness of creation and its connection to the liturgy and the eucharist:

The Church believes (...) that she exists to sanctify and unite all creation and to highlight it as something sacred, which contains within it the presence of God himself, and therefore offers it to God as Eucharist, as “Thine own of Thine own,” during the Divine Liturgy (p. 35).

Zizioulas then answers a specific question about the new EU Green Deal, which is a very positive inclusion as it addresses the themes brought up in the various introductions. He concludes the interview by pointing to the spiritual ascetic tradition of the Church as a way to “fight the greed, avarice and egocentrism of man, which lead to the reckless and excessive use (abuse) of natural resources, which characterizes our modern culture” (p. 38-39). By doing this, he praises secular initiatives, while firmly highlighting and un-

derlining the vital need for a spiritual transformation. In a sense, the whole purpose of the publication is established in this short interview and that is something worth praising.

The second article we would like to highlight is “The Orthodox Christian Worldview and the Ecological Problem” by Bishop Ignatije Midić of the Serbian Orthodox Church. From the start, Midić recognizes the main causes for the ecological issues: egoism, greed and consumerism. These three could in a sense be seen as one and the same, namely the placing of man at the center of everything, a twisted humanism as critiqued by the great Serbian theologian of the 20th century, St. Justin Popović.³ This combined with the rapid and often uncontrolled industrialization of the last century is a fatal mixture according to Midić. He writes, “Modern man has become an uncontrolled consumer of everything” (p. 61). What makes Midić article however stand out, is his clear understanding of the broader issues connected to this question. He masterfully highlights the dangers of unplanned and rushed solutions to the ecological issues in question. He points to the problem of unemployment which he argues can lead to revolutions and even wars, hence, underlining that while there are solutions to the ecological issues, they must be undertaken in a balanced way, otherwise, we will eliminate one problem but create another one.

His suggested solutions are deeply rooted in the Orthodox tradition. He argues that man is not created to be an individual per se, but to be in communion with others, in a community. Therefore, he writes, “a man is a person only if he expresses his freedom as love for another man, as freedom for another” (p. 65). This means that we can only overcome all of this if we truly think about the whole (community, city, country, world), and not only about only ourselves and our cravings (egoism). The world and our relations to others, he writes, must mirror the communion of the Persons of the Holy Trinity. Through our God-given free will, we must want to love others and must want their best. In this love is included the creation we live in, as this is something that we all share. Midić here dives deep into the mystical theology of the Orthodox Church. While a risk that could leave some readers confused by the deep theological terminology, Midić manages to keep it very straightforward without sacrificing the message he is conveying. Lastly, he summarizes his message as such: “Only by renouncing our own will, or more precisely, self-will, egoism, and individualism, is one able to change consumer mentality. This is indicated by the ascetic experience in Christianity” (p. 71). This article is one of the most strictly theological highlights of this book,

³ Justin Popović, *The Orthodox Church and Ecumenism*, trans. Benjamin Emmanuel Stanley (Birmingham: Lazarica Press, 2000), 99–111.

with its depth that never overwhelms. Considering this is co-published by the WWF and most likely will be read by many non-theologians, we see this as very positive.

The third article we want to highlight more in-depth is a “non-theological” one. “The Climate and the Need for Orthodox Stewardship” by Theodota Nantsou. It chronologically follows the great theological work of Midić and this makes a lot of sense. Nantsou shows a profound understanding of Orthodox theology when she writes

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 Orthodox Church. Ethics and theology, however, does not automatically translate into practice (p. 72).

Some in her position have argued that the Orthodox Church does not de facto have a position, or theology, on the environment or its ethics, arguing it needs one. Asproulis does this in this very same book in his article when he argues such a theology “is still missing especially from an Eastern Orthodox standpoint” (p. 85). We are however pleased that Nantsou recognizes that the issue is not theoretical, but rather practical. The Orthodox perspectives on this are there, as she writes, in both the patristic and ascetical tradition, and well as in the liturgical life of the Church. Her article is deeply scientific, and through the use of empirical data, illustrates the issues of global warming and changes in the biodiversity of our planet. She believes that the Church should lead social actions to improve environmental issues. She even lists a few good examples of such a leadership role of the Church. While she recognizes that the Church perhaps cannot do as many practical things as states and large corporations can, she notes the Church has a great moral and ethical authority in the Balkan states. This gives the Church an opportunity to make changes “from within” among its faithful, spiritually and morally. In Montenegro for instance, the Orthodox Church was one of the top two of the most trusted public institutions in the country in 2019 (together with the educational system).⁴ It is because of this that the Church can and should be a leader in the fight for the environment. It has the authority to do so, and it should do so, as Nantsou points out.

In the fourth article we want to highlight, “‘Rebirth from above’ as a Condition for the Solution of Climate Change” by Zvezdan Kalmar, we encounter arguably the greatest contribution of this whole publication. Kalmar

⁴ <http://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/443941/Vecina-gradana-Crne-Gore-veruje-Srpskoj-pravoslavnoj-crkvi>, last accessed March 11, 2021.

starts by demonstrating and highlighting the failings of industrialization and the failed promises it provided. He writes:

Despite promises from industry and science that they will provide fulfillment of our needs, offer a better life and security for all Human beings, such promises have failed and today we are witness to unheard of divisions between the rich and the poor, global destruction of God's Creation ("Nature" is just part of God's Creation), extinction of species of animals and plants on an unprecedented scale and at an unheard of rate, and rising levels of poverty despite the rapid march of triumphant science (p. 105).

As we here see, Kalmar does not shy away from difficult topics, and this is to be praised. After he presents his brilliant overview of the economic imbalance in the world, he swiftly moves to address the issues at hand from a spiritual perspective. He sees the human egoistic strive for material needs as a "renewed attempt by humans to construct the tower of Babel with which they would reach and subdue the heavens to their own will" (p. 105). History repeats itself as the same old sins are repeated by new generations in new contexts; with the core problem being the rejection of God.

Kalmar rightly points out that the solutions for the climate crisis cannot only be technological, they have to be accompanied by a "moral rebirth, societal, legal and economic restructuring" (p. 108), as only this can truly combat "climate change, environmental pollution on a global scale while eradicating poverty, providing universal access to clean, affordable energy (including Food as Energy), access to clean and potable water for all" (p. 108).

In his article, which we encourage everyone to read, study and cherish, he masterfully demonstrates the balanced Orthodox Christian approach to the question, while at the same time avoiding falling into the many anti-scientific traps some Christians sadly fall into. Change can only be achieved through our spiritual rebirth, which then will allow us to correctly use our technologies for the benefit of our neighbors.

If we want to become one with God together with the whole World our change, Re-Birth- from above (καινή κτίσις, new creation; cf. 2 Cor. 5:17) should be fully, profound, real, and reflected in our deeds coming from belief (p. 114-155).

Metropolitan Ignatius Georgakopoulos offers in his article "Climate Change and our Theological and Pastoral Responsibility Today: Reflections of a Bishop" a highly spiritual perspective on the issue, similar to that of Midić, and also includes everyday pastoral concerns which are of great value.

Metropolitan Pavlos Papalexiou in his "The Natural Environment, Theology and Human Being" points out that many today blame Christianity

for the current ecological crisis and therefore it is important for the Orthodox Church to present its ancient view on the question. He also argues very well that creation reveals the Creator Himself and that creation is “very good,” and not simply dead matter. He blames industrialization and secularization for the current issues, making it a highly spiritual question for him.

Nikolaos Asproulis offers in his “Creation as Gift: A Sketch for an Orthodox Green Theology” a deep theological analysis of the issue. He argues that the concept of ex-nihilo must be the foundation of eco-theology. He writes, quoting Zizioulas, “The world does not belong to us and we are not «inhabitants and masters» of nature...but rather «stewards and managers»” (p. 87). He almost exclusively quotes Zizioulas and the text tends to be a bit confusing and complicated, but nevertheless adds a lot of value to the publication.

Sveto Riboloff in his “Bulgarian Orthodox Theology and the Climate Challenges” highlights an important issue seen in most Orthodox educational institutions, not just in Bulgaria. Namely, the lack of deeper education and reflection on the issue of ecology. The issue, generally, of lack of education is a big problem connected to the environmental issues of our time. How can we solve something we know little or nothing about? Riboloff does good to highlight this issue, especially with regards to theological formation in Bulgaria.

Thymio Papayannis in his “A Contemporary View of Creation” very briefly analyses the climate crisis as well as the COVID-19 crisis. He calls for the Church, as well as other big religions, to act and use their influence to address the issues and the social ramifications of them.

Fr. Ioannis Economides in his short but on-point article “A Priestly Call for Action: Stop Destroying the Planet Now!” should be remembered and perhaps summarized especially for one powerful sentence, “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” (p. 120).

First and foremost, the authors and editors of this publication should be recognized for their efforts in accomplishing their stated objective as found in the introduction. By combining both classic theological works with more scientific ones in a single volume, the outcome could have been a failure. However, this approach works very well throughout the publication, and the various articles mostly complement each other. From some parts of the introductions, one might have thought this publication could have been called “The Paris Agreement: An Orthodox View” or “The EU Green Deal: An Orthodox Perspective.” However, the depth and variety of articles proved

that while these agreements were substantially highlighted in the introductions, and the articles themselves provide a much deeper and broader analysis of the issue at hand. Also, all of the articles mostly established the basic Orthodox view on this problem: that this issue is a spiritual one at heart, and a lack of love, respect and care for our neighbors, led by greed and materialism, is the core of the issue. The Church with its moral teachings is in the position to address these issues. By doing so, it can foster a more balanced view on and approach to present environmental concerns. This publication helps along this way and it reaffirms that the Orthodox Church not only can but should have a leading role in the solution.