

Christianity - Greek Orthodox

988 words

Ecological endeavours have been at the heart of Greek Orthodox activities for more than 15 years and are undertaken by various official bodies such as the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople and the autocephalous Church of Greece. Given the wide attention to environmental issues on part of many religions across the globe, such an interest sounds hardly surprising. The greater sensitisation of the major world religions for environmental problems has been largely effected after the inter-religious meeting of Asisi (26 October 1986). In these endeavours an attempt is usually made to articulate the *differentia specifica* of the Orthodox contribution to environmental issues in contrast to other Christian traditions and religions.

Beginning with the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, this interest has been manifested already by Patriarch Dimitrios I (1972-1991), who intended to render this traditional centre of Orthodoxy a place for prayer for the creation. After a relevant proposal of an environmental congress held on the island of Patmos in September 1988, he declared in 1989 that each first day of September, i.e., the beginning of the new ecclesiastical year, should be kept as a day of the protection of the environment. In addition, the official hymnographer of the Church, the monk Gerasimos Mikragiannanitis from Mount Athos, was entrusted with the composition of a service for the environment and all creation to be celebrated always on September 1st, which he did in 1990 (published in Thessaloniki 1997). Patriarch Dimitrios was active in many other related endeavours, as in the organisation of an inter-Orthodox conference (5-12 November 1991) in the “Orthodox Academy of Crete” in collaboration with the World Wildlife Fund, in which the basic tenets of the Orthodox

position towards the ecological crisis were articulated. It is in this Academy that an “Institute of Ecology and Theology” was created too as a concrete response to the related initiatives of the Patriarchate of Constantinople.

But the one who has identified himself fully with the cause of environmental protection was his follower, Patriarch Bartholomew I (since 1991), who rightly was given the nickname “the Green Patriarch”. During his numerous visits to Greece and abroad he has almost always exhibited publicly his ecological sensitivities. Among his major activities are the environmental summer seminars organised at the Orthodox School of Theology on the island of Halki in cooperation with the WWF in 1994 (“The Environment and Religious Education”), in 1995 (“The Environment and Ethics”), and in 1997 (“The Environment and Justice”), while since 1999 a special “Halki Ecological Institute” has been active there. In addition, under his auspices some international symposia on religion, science and the environment have taken place. The first one in September 1995 on the occasion of the 1900th anniversary of the Book of the Apocalypse on the theme “Revelation and the Environment from 95 to 1995”, which took place on board a ship on the Aegean Sea. The second one entitled “The Black Sea in Crisis” was dedicated to the protection of natural environment of the Black Sea and took place in September 1997 under the patronage of the European Commission on board a ship that carried the participants along the Black and the Aegean Sea. The third floating symposium entitled “Danube: River of Life” took place in October 1999 again under the patronage of the European Commission during a 2,800 km voyage down the Danube from Passau (Germany) to the Danube Delta in Romania and the Ukraine and aimed at highlighting the river’s many problems and war damage

It is also not accidental that an eminent Greek theologian of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, Metro-politan of Pergamon Ioannis Zizioulas, has been especially active in developing an Orthodox theology of environment and has been at the forefront of relevant ecological endeavours. His book *Η κτίση ως ευχαριστία: θεολογική προσέγγιση στο πρόβλημα της οικολογίας* [= *Creation as Eucharist: a Theological Approach to the Problem of Ecology*] (Athens 1992) has become a classical text and was a welcome Greek contribution in this area after the Russian theologian N.Zabolotskij had dealt with such issues in another context in the 1970s.

Analogous sensitivities for the protection of the environment including lectures, meetings, conferences, publications and other activities have been also shown by the Church of Greece under the auspices of Archbishop Serapheim (1974-1998) and especially since 1987, the international year for the protection of the environment. The same interest has been occasionally shown at a lower base in the various dioceses, in which several metropolitans exhibited a vivid interest in local ecological problems (e.g., on the Ionian islands for the protection of the longerhead sea turtle *Caretta caretta*). In addition, Saint Modestos, celebrated on the 16th of December, has been declared officially by the Church as the protector of animals following a demand of the relevant Greek organisations. Finally, another service for the protection of the environment has also been composed by the Metropolitan of Patras Nikodimos (Vallindras), which following a decree of the Holy Synod of 10 January 1992 is celebrated every September 1st. Similar interests in ecological issues are also exhibited by the new Archbishop Christodoulos (since 1998), while there is a special “Synodal Committee for Divine and Political Providence and Ecology.”

The greater involvement of the above sister Churches in ecological endeavours is certainly a recent phenomenon, but it is not one without a prehistory. The protection

of the environment has been an issue for the Church occasionally in the past too (cf. an encyclical of the Church of Greece against those burning and destroying forests in April 1845). While it is true that this involvement of the Church in environmental issues has its critics, these endeavours perform many other functions on a domestic as well as international level. The adoption of the ecological cause, for example, by the Patriarchate of Constantinople has enhanced its useful broader role and its reputation worldwide, as it is no longer considered to be a beleaguered relic of Byzantium.

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Further Reading

Hobson, Sarah, and David Mee Laurence, eds. "The Black Sea in Crisis. Symposium II. An Encounter of Beliefs: A Single Objective Black Sea, 920-28 September 1997)." *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 10:1, (1999).

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