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# SOCIOLOGICAL RELEVANCE OF THE ECOLOGICAL THOUGHT OF ECUMENICAL PATRIARCH BARTHOLOMEW

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(Received 31 March 2019, revised 17 June 2019)

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## **Abstract**

Based on the documents published by the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew on ecological topics or on the speeches that he provided, but also on the practical attitude that he had towards the environmental problems, this research investigates his ecological attitude from the lengths of their sociological relevance. Topics as 'ecological terrorism', 'integral ecology', or 'pilgrimage' that influenced also Ecumenical Movement, Pope Francis or other political and economic leaders, are presented and investigated in a research that wants to see how it can be evaluated from a sociological point of view the attitude of the Constantinople Patriarch who became famous for his activity in this area. The author also underlines the continuity that exists between his activities and the actions initiated by his predecessor, Patriarch Dimitrios.

*Keywords:* ecology, Green Patriarch, sociology, politics, Global environment day

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## **1. Introduction**

One of the most important nowadays voices that plead for an ecologist way of life is for sure the ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew. The fact that famous universities have granted him honorary PhD's or different prizes of important personalities like Pope Francis [1], Phierre Rhabi [2-5], Prince Phillip, Duke of Edinburgh refers him is for sure a proof of the relevance of his ideas for contemporary society.

Born in Imvros Island from Gokceada, Demetrios Archontis who will later become Bartholomew 1<sup>st</sup> of Constantinople, graduated in 1961 the Patriarchal School in Halki and later, between 1963 and 1968, studied in University of Munich, Ecumenical Institute of Bossey and Institute of Oriental Studies of Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome [<https://www.patriarchate.org/the-green-patriarch>, 1-3, accessed 06.05.2019]. From the ecclesiastic point of view, the landmarks of his biography are, as it follows: deacon ordination and monastic tonsure in 1961, priest ordination in 1969, director of the newly established special Personal Office of Patriarch Dimitrios in 1973, metropolitan

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of Philadelphia from 1973 until 1990 when he became metropolitan of Chalcedon, and from October 1991, Ecumenical Patriarch [<https://www.patriarchate.org/the-green-patriarch>; 6].

From the very beginning of his election there, he tried to develop topics as ecumenism, inter-religious dialogue and protection of environment [6]. Conscious of the relevance of this topic for his life and activity, we will try there to investigate the elements of political sociology related with his discourse on the aforementioned topic and to show why together with people like Pope Francis I, Phierre Rhabi [2-5] and many others he deserves a special place between the important voices of nowadays clergymen ecologists.

We will use there the anthologies made by Father John Chryssavgis that contain his pastoral encyclicals and other documents [6], his books [7], but also other books and articles that contain his ideas or opinions related to them, or sociological approaches dedicated to the topic that we investigate [8]. When necessary, we will also compare his ideas and visions with other relevant voices from the same area, like Pope Francis.

One could of course ask himself why it should be important an approach that comes from the area of political sociology while the author is a clergyman and uses theological arguments to present his thought. The answer is that the fact that people like Prince Phillip, Duke of Edinburgh was so interested in his work and even participated to the events organised by the bishop of Constantinople and even forwarded some of his books [9] the title of ‘green Patriarch’ has been – “formalized in the White House by Al Gore, Vice President of United States” [2, p. 4] and many of the prizes or distinctions where given to him by political organisations is a proof of the relevance of his ideas for the political space. Moreover, as one of his biographers underlines:

“In April 1994, the Ecumenical Patriarch was invited to the administrative offices of the European Commission where he delivered a speech with a significant message. It was the first time that someone who was not a state or political leader had been asked to address the European Commission. The influence and impact of the young Patriarch was broadening to secular and governmental levels.” [2, p. 7]

Therefore, we will present there the evolution of his conception about environmental crisis, relevance of ecology for his thought and the way how his ideas impacted theological, sociological and political space, using the aforementioned sources and underlining the actual dimension of some of his ideas.

## **2. Sociological relevance of the ecological thought of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew**

Taking a look on Patriarch Bartholomew’s biography, we will see, as biographers note, that: “From the outset of his tenure-indeed, from the very moment of his enthronement address – Patriarch Bartholomew outlined the dimensions of his leadership and vision within the Orthodox Church: the vigilant

education in matters of theology, liturgy and spirituality; the strengthening of Orthodox unity and cooperation; the continuation of ecumenical engagement with other Christian churches and confessions; the intensification of inter-religious dialogue for peaceful coexistence; and the initiation of discussion and action for the protection of the environment against ecological pollution and destruction.” [2, p. 3]

Therefore, education, spirituality, ecumenical engagement, protection of environment against pollution and destruction together to the relevance of education and need for peaceful coexistence can be considered the pillars of his activity as an ecumenical Patriarch. It could be surely said that due to the fact that he sees all of them together, he develops a holistic vision on the contemporary society and its needs in a sociological context (because of the emphasis put on the community and not on individual [10]). But where can we find the roots of his way of thinking and when did his vision start to develop in this direction? Following his biography and work, we think we will be able to offer an answer to this question.

His commitment to ecology and protection of environment as a form of prevent from an ecological crisis [11] started to be manifested towards practical actions in the middle of 80s [6, p. 4] and it is linked with practical activities, conferences or other similar activities [11, p. 146-177]. Since he became Patriarch, he organised different conferences and meetings with Primate of the other Orthodox Churches, theologians, businessmen, politicians or scholars underlining the relevance of a good management of resources and the need for a responsible understanding of the Creation. At the pan-Orthodox level, among his achievements there can be surely mentioned there is the establishment of 1<sup>st</sup> of September as the World day of Environment for the entire Orthodox space (by bringing into act an older initiative from 1988 of his predecessor, Patriarch Demetrios [6, p. 14, 59], also accepted by the World Council of Churches [11, p. 152], or the insertion on the list of debated topics from the Pan-Orthodox Council of Crete of ecology and environmental crisis, inside the document dedicated to the mission of the Orthodox Church in nowadays world [<https://www.holycouncil.org/-/mission-orthodox-church-todays-world>, accessed 13.03.2019]).

Starting from a theological assumption, namely the fact that the human being is the image of God and of the Trinity and, as a master or crown of creation [6, p. 73], must take care of it as God himself takes care of him through the Providence [11, p. 158], he develops a complex vision with inter-disciplinary accents. Conscious of the fact that the resources of the land are not inexhaustible and their use is linked with the survival of human species [8, p. 13], he often refers to the fact that we must see them not only as our goods, but also as the ones of the future generations. In a lecture provided to the *Living Universe Conference* in Yale University (November 2014), after speaking about the need to read in “nature’s book” [6, p. 319], fact that is a fundamental aspect of hesychasm [<https://www.holycouncil.org/-/mission-orthodox-church-todays-world>, 64], he says that: “Natural environment – the air, water, the land, is not

only a good of the present generation, but equally, one of the future ones. We must sincerely admit that the humanity deserves more than the show that takes place under our eyes. We and the ones that come after us, our children, our disciples, have the right to a better world, a calmer one and with a clearer vision. A world free of corruption, violence and blood, a generous and kind one.” [7, p. 60-61]

Why would the fight against corruption and ecology linked with the human being and its future generation's survival? Because as the sociologists underline: “if the ambient is ill, it is seek also the one who lives inside it. In reality, this correlation is not so immediate and as it should see it coherent” [12]. Therefore, as Patriarch Bartholomew will underline, the ambient crisis is a form of social injustice [8, p. 17].

Deepening this aspect and trying to understand its inside elements, he will use in an encyclical letter from 1996 a very important keyword that represents even today one of his most original contributions to the environmental discourse, namely the ecological terrorism, defined as: “the form of exaggeration or abusive intervention in the natural order of things, at times even the point of exercising interstate threat and violence. This has resulted also in the brutal contravention of international conventions on necessary ecological arrangements and the stubborn refusal to accept the financial burdens of elementary and essential ecological discipline as well as a plethora of other violations, which threaten directly the very air that we breathe.” [6, p. 37]

According to him, as it can be seen, the economic aspects are important, but they do not constitute the main cause of the crisis. He is also conscious of the meaning of globalization and the questions that it raises and on the fact that, due to the changes that took places in the last years, it must be taken into consideration the change of paradigm. Therefore, he says in the encyclical letter from 1994: “On a number of occasions in the ecclesiastical year, the Church prays that God may protect humanity from natural catastrophes: from earthquakes, storms, famine and floods. Yet, today, we observe the reverse. On September 1<sup>st</sup>, the day devoted to God’s handiwork, the Church implores the Creator to protect natures from calamities of human origin, calamities such as pollution, war, exploitation, waste and secularism... from this perspective, the Church, in its wisdom, brings before our eyes a message of deep significance, one that touches upon the central problems of fallen humanity and its restoration. This is the problem of the polarization of individual sin against collective responsibility.” [6, p. 32]

Reading these rows, one could ask himself if this vision is not a very pessimistic one and if its content which seems rather theological has relevance for the sociological area. It is easy to prove its relevance for the last aspect. The understanding of human role in creation or prevention from calamities that can affect the survival of human species is linked with this topic and the problems that come every day and bring so many loses of lives are an evidence that he is not wrong. These aspects are very important and constitute some of the main points of secular understanding of ecology, as Patriarch Bartholomew will

underline in the address at the Confederal of the First Honorary Doctorate of the Department of Environmental Studies from University of the Aegean, in 27<sup>th</sup> of October 1994: “Contemporary ecology, as a matter of scientific study, but also in the form of crusades and movements for the salvation of our earthly ecosystem, is one of the most characteristic expressions of human interest concentrated on practical goals. The logic of environmental protection is presented as a purely utilitarian matter. If we do not protect our natural environment, then our own survival will increasingly be rendered more difficult and problematic, while the very presence of the human race on this planet will be threatened very soon. The danger of degeneration or even annihilation of the human race is described as imminent.” [6, p. 65]

Interesting is also the attitude of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew towards the science and its development in nowadays world. Linked with the environment, his ideas from this area also influenced the documents issued by the Pan-Orthodox Council from Crete [13, 14] and show a deep and equilibrate evaluation of the problematic. The accent that he puts is not on the scientific evolution as a problem, but on the fact that the arrogance that in some situations can be found in some scientists’ attitude, may cause the destruction of the planet and even the human existence. His arguments from a speech provided in 12<sup>th</sup> of June 2002 in Oslo are relevant in this sense: “The arrogance that destroyed the Tower of Babel, through the misuse of power and knowledge, always lurks as a temptation. The natural energy wrought by the Sun as a blessing on the Earth can prove perilous when profaned by the hands of irresponsible scientists. The interventions of genetics, which arouse enthusiasm in their potential, have not been exhaustively explored with a view of their side effects. We are not opposed to knowledge but we underline the importance of proceeding with discernment. We also stress the possible dangers of premature intervention, which may lead, as Euripides emphasized, to ‘the desire to become greater than the gods’, which the classical Greeks described as ‘hubris’. Such discord destroys the inner harmony that characterizes the beauty and glory of the world, which Saint Maximus the Confessor called ‘a cosmic liturgy’.” [6, p. 74-75]

Fine sociologist, he understands the fact that the environment protection as the Christian vocation cannot be fulfilled without a real communication [6, p. 160] and pleads for an ascetical way of life, based on Christian spirituality [6, p. 81], but with reach sociological implications.

The walk together towards the welfare of the planet, initiated by him that influenced both Pope Francis I or the Ecumenical Movement [15] is therefore seen by him as a pilgrimage [6, p. 262] that has sociological, political and ecclesiological implications. Conscious of the fact that the Christian Church is the one who “must sound the alarm of danger” [6, p. 368], he presents the situation of nowadays world showing its complexity and proposing solutions as rational consume, ascetics as a way of life understanding creation as a gift of God [6, p. 73].

### 3. Conclusions

As we have tried to underline in our research, the vision of the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew towards the ecological crisis is a complex one and it continues the direction of his predecessor, Patriarch Dimitrios. Pleading against the utilitarian vision of the world and resources, he proposes another approach, with theological fundamentals and sociological role, that is supposed to bring to the “integral ecology” [14], a concept branded by him. He says about the consequences of this theological vision: “Two fundamental consequences follow from this understanding (the religious one, our note). First, *the use of the world is not an end in itself for humanity, but a way of relating to God*. In humanity distorts the use of this world into an egocentric abuse of greed, by dominating and destroying nature, then humanity is denying and destroying its own life-giving relationship with God, a relationship destined to continue into eternity. Second, *the world as God’s creation, ceases to be a neutral object for human use*. It incarnates the word of the Creator like every other creation embodies the word of its artist. The objectives of natural reality bear the seal of their divine Creator’s wisdom and love, they are words (*logoi*, which also implies meaning) of God inviting humanity to dialogue (*dialogos*) with God.” [6, p. 68]

Also, among the topics that he brings into discussion is the ecological terrorism and the need for an ascetic use of the environment because of the finishing character of the resources. Conscious of the fact that is difficult to connect scientific environmental discourse with the theological one [6, p. 65], he never limits his attitude to preaching or praying but he organises conferences, meetings with political people, economists or clergymen, he inaugurates a day of creation in the entire Orthodox space and insists on the role played by the society and politics in the understanding and shifting the future of the world and human species.

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