
As climate change shapes up to be the defining humanitarian issue of the 21st century, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew advocates an urgent and comprehensive response inspired by a biblical foundation in principles of environmental stewardship and a commitment to caring for the world’s impoverished, who will bear the direct brunt of environmental impact. His conviction grants the license to speak with authority on other issues of social justice and contemporary global urgency.

*Encountering the Mystery* is a foray into the manifold openings of the Patriarch in recent years, exploring human rights and global warming, world poverty and economy, religious fundamentalism, and nationalism from a religious perspective. The book speaks to Orthodox readers about the contemporary social and political dimensions of their ancient faith; it also speaks to adherents of other confessions and faiths, introducing an ecumenical dimension to basic Orthodox tenets. Patriarch Bartholomew boldly “encounters” the difficult and sensitive issues facing our world: the deep mistrust between East and West, the respect for human rights and destruction of the natural environment, and the sharp division among religious faiths. As one who knows first-hand what it means to survive in an overwhelmingly Muslim nation presently seeking admission to the European Union, the Patriarch has struggled to reduce conflict among divided factions even in the face of personal and institutional persecution. While the Ecumenical Patriarchate has survived wars, the crusades, invasions, and sultan rules, today it is routinely harassed by the notorious “Gray Wolves” in virulent demonstrations of unhealthy nationalism. Ironically, His All Holiness not only ardently supports Turkey’s bid for entry to the EU, regarding this—perhaps even beyond NATO, whose role has more recently diminished—as the most hopeful and viable means for achieving security in Greco-Turkish relations in the wider region. Moreover, the Patriarch has assumed unprecedented leadership throughout the Middle East on tolerance and peace, particularly in the aftermath of September 11th, with the motto: “War in the name of religion is war against religion.” He recognizes Orthodoxy’s unique responsibility in assisting rapprochement between East and West, having—as he is fond of saying—“a foot in
both worlds.” In the words of Madeleine Albright, former US Secretary of State: “The Ecumenical Patriarch is renowned as a bridge-builder. *Encountering the Mystery* is a bridge in book form.”

The environmental initiatives of the Ecumenical Patriarchate date back to the mid-1980s with the third session of the Pre-Synodal Pan-Orthodox Conference held in Chambésy (Oct. 28-Nov. 6, 1986). Several Inter-Orthodox meetings followed on the subject of “Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation”: The first of three consultations was held in Sofia, Bulgaria (1987). A third Inter-Orthodox consultation was held in Minsk, Belarus (1989), while an environmental program was also piloted in Ormylia, Greece (1990). However, the second—and perhaps most significant—of these consultations, was held in Patmos, Greece (1988), to mark the 900th anniversary of the historic Monastery of St. John the Theologian. The then Ecumenical Patriarch, Demetrios, assigned Metropolitan John (Zizioulas) of Pergamon as Patriarchal representative to this conference entitled “Revelation and the Future of Humanity” and organized jointly by the Patriarchate, the Greek Ministry of Cultural Affairs, and local civil authorities. One of the primary recommendations of this conference was that the Ecumenical Patriarchate should designate one day each year for the protection of the natural environment. This conference proved a catalyst for subsequent Patriarchal initiatives on the environment.

In 1989, Patriarch Demetrios, the immediate predecessor of Patriarch Bartholomew, who was his closest adviser, published the first encyclical letter on the environment. This encyclical, proclaimed on the occasion of the first day of the new ecclesiastical calendar, formally established September 1st as a day for all Orthodox Christians within the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate to offer prayers for the preservation of the natural creation. A similar encyclical is published annually on the first day of September. A month after his election in 1991, the present Ecumenical Patriarch, Bartholomew, convened an ecological gathering entitled: “Living in the Creation of the Lord.” That convention on the island of Crete was officially opened by Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh and International Chairman of the WWF. In the following year, Patriarch Bartholomew called an unprecedented meeting of all Orthodox Patriarchs and Primates in Istanbul, once again introducing the topic of the protection of the natural environment and inviting all the Orthodox leaders to inform their churches about the critical significance of this issue for