



Orthodox Reflection on a Current Issue

Climate of Fear – or Climate of Grace?

By Father Christopher H. Bender
Chair, Orthodox Fellowship of the Transfiguration
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In these times of uncertainty and strife, when our nation has been brutally attacked by ruthless and unseen enemies, it is understandable that many of us have found that our priorities have changed. A climate of fear has gripped the land. Questions of safety and security, both at home and abroad, have become uppermost in people's minds. As a result, many folks have felt it necessary to put other important concerns and problems on the "back-burner." This climate of fear has led, we might say, to a climate of indifference towards other burning issues of our day. Unfortunately, though, the world is far too complicated a place for us to be able to afford such a luxury for long. Otherwise, we begin to resemble the classic case of the patient who is "too busy" to pay any attention to his or her serious illness, and who therefore neglects to seek help until it is too late to do anything. We all know how such stories usually end.

One such problem that cries out for our attention is that of worldwide climate change. Leading climate scientists the world over agree, on the basis of sound research, that global warming is real and the effects are likely to be severe. As Christians, we ought to add here: it is a religious issue. How we respond to this growing global crisis will serve as a true test of how faithful we are to our Lord's command that we care about "the least of these," our brothers and sisters who are imperiled by this threat. And, as we shall see, we must not think that the danger is only real for poor strangers in faraway places: as the years pass, climate change will affect both us and, especially, our children in more and more serious ways.

What then, are the potential effects of human-induced global climate change? Climate scientists have both "real-time" data from the field to study, with regard to everything from temperature and rainfall patterns to habitat migration and glacial melting, as well as ever-more-sophisticated computer models to draw from. What do they tell us? What can we expect? As long as human beings continue on our present path, burning fossil fuels for energy and emitting certain other pollutants as well, we will go on contributing to what is called the "greenhouse effect," which traps extra heat inside the earth's atmosphere. As a consequence, glaciers will melt, oceans will expand; severe hurricanes and other storms will become more frequent; low-lying coastal areas will be inundated, killing millions and leaving the survivors with no place to live; tropical illnesses will migrate farther and farther from the equator, along with the pests which carry them. Furthermore, some of today's most fertile agricultural areas will turn far more arid, thus disrupting the world's food supply. Some regions (possibly including much of Northern Europe) will actually grow colder, and may become uninhabitable for that reason. Thousands of plant and animal species will probably go extinct, because they are adapted to living under rather narrow climatic conditions, and will find that the changes have occurred too rapidly for them to adjust or migrate.

What about our own children and grandchildren? Do we not live in the wealthiest and most powerful country on earth, and will not that shield them from such terrible consequences? Don't count on it. The future that we shall bequeath to our progeny shall be grim indeed: food shortages, disruptions to the world's economic system; ever-more-violent hurricanes and storms -- as starters! And if you fear West Nile Virus, just wait until malaria or sleeping sickness or one of the other terrible tropical illnesses becomes endemic in America! Furthermore, we cannot expect that the millions of persons displaced by coastal flooding will just sit back in refuge camps and wait to die. Political instability that will surely dwarf our current difficulties is a reasonable expectation. Most of us would probably claim that nothing is more precious to us than our children and grandchildren -- not even life itself. So then, how can we be indifferent to the fate which awaits them if we refuse to act today, to change our lifestyles and government policies in order to curb global warming?

How can we escape from our current dilemma? Let's be honest: what part of our current way of life would we be willing to sacrifice, for the sake of curbing global warming? We have grown more than attached to the luxuries that surround us -- our large vehicles and houses, our computers, our televisions, DVD's and other electronic toys, summer fruit all year 'round -- in fact, we consider these necessities. So, then, we may perhaps have heard about global climate change, we may even be concerned about it, but not enough to make any real sacrifices in our energy-dependent way of life. Is there no way out of this impasse? We are reminded of the words of St. Paul, lamenting the reality of human weakness, in the face of sin: "Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" (Rom. 7:24) Immediately, though, he provides his own answer: "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Rom. 7:25)

Although it may not seem obvious at first, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ has much to offer us, through his teachings, His example, and, most importantly, through His redemptive work on the Cross, in our struggle to come to grips with the challenge of global warming. Central here is what our Lord has to teach us about God's relationship to the world. As we shall see, the term "world" takes on more than one meaning in the Scriptures. We shall focus on four: 1) God's good creation; 2) the locus for evil and the defiance of God; 3) The world as the arena in which human beings make their choice for evil or for good -- with eternal consequences; 4) the object of God's saving work. Sometimes the word is used to refer positively to the totality of God's creation, including humanity; at other times, it seems to be more limited and negative in scope, referring primarily to human beings in our sinfulness, as well as to the evil that inspires us. What we don't find, however, is the concept of the world most prominent today: namely, that of the earth as pure instrument, with no intrinsic value of its own, our private property to be used or abused by human beings purely for our own profit, pleasure and convenience, without regard to the consequences on other forms of life, or even on other humans.

1) The world as God's good creation.

"In the beginning..." -- these are the words with which St. John the Theologian and Evangelist opens the Fourth Gospel, deliberately echoing the first verse of Genesis. It is his intention to declare the divine identity of the Word of God, God's Son, by linking Him with God the Father's creative act of bringing the universe into existence: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men." (John 1:1-4, RSV)

In other words, God the Son was the Executor of the will of God the Father, cooperating with Him in

perfect harmony to create the cosmos. But God did not create a flawed or broken world; on the contrary, as we read again and again in the first chapter of Genesis, "God saw that it was good." (Gen. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). It is a basic tenet of Orthodox Christianity that this original goodness was never taken away (although it has been tainted by the introduction of sin). And central to this goodness is the very existence of life on earth, in all its glorious variety and kinds. This is the world we humans, created in God's image and likeness, are called to take responsibility for, to cultivate and protect, which is the meaning of the command to "have dominion" over the other creatures (Gen. 1:28). God never commanded us, or gave us permission, to exploit and trash this world, as some seem to believe. Nor did God ever deed the planet over to us. It is God's creation, not ours (Psalm 24:1); we are merely given stewardship of it. Nothing on this earth belongs to us as our property in an absolute sense. So, we will always be answerable for what we have done with that which has been entrusted to us (Matt. 18:23-35).

2) The world as the locus for evil and the defiance of God.

Unfortunately, human beings could not leave their home, this "good creation," well enough alone; through their disobedience, sin entered the world. The result is an environment which is no longer a "paradise" for people, where all human needs can be easily met without much effort. Rather, we live in a difficult world where we must suffer and struggle, in order to survive. Human beings did not become "totally depraved" through the fall, we Orthodox believe; nor do we bear the guilt for the sin of the first parents. Instead, we inherit the condition which ensued: namely, that we are subject to death, and are prone to sin as a result. Too easily, we give our hearts over to the "prince of this world," the devil, who entices us in various and sundry ways to pursue our own perceived advantage at the expense of others. For example, we prefer our spacious vehicles and houses (even though we could just as easily get along with much smaller ones), because of the comfort, security, and prestige they confer, even when we come to realize just how much energy it costs to run them.

Our Lord rejects this "world" in no uncertain terms. He tells His disciples at the Last Supper: "If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. . . . In the world you have tribulation. But be of good cheer, I have overcome the world." (John 15:18, 16:33). In His prayer to the Father, at the same event, He continues: "I have given them thy word; and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. I do not pray that thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that thou shouldst keep them from the evil one" (John 17:14-15). In saying these words, Jesus is not rejecting the entirety of His Father's creation, material and spiritual; rather His words are a symbolic way of referring to the fallen world of sin and death, of envy and lust for power, of greed and hardness of heart. This is the world that could not bear the presence of the Good in it, and which therefore had to destroy the Incarnate One. It is primarily a world that we humans have created for ourselves, in our pride and blindness, as we prefer the blandishments of the serpent to the "narrow road" that leads to God's Kingdom. In this world it is far too easy to rationalize away our selfish lifestyle choices, ignoring the effect they might have on today's poor or future generations everywhere, in a manner not unlike the rich man who ignored poor, suffering Lazarus at his door, in Jesus' parable (Luke 16:19-31).

3) The world as the arena in which human beings make their choice for evil or for good -- with eternal consequences.

In Matthew 13:37-43, Jesus explains the parable of the weeds (found in Matt. 13:24-30):

He who sows the good seed is the Son of man; the field is the world, and the good seed means the sons of the kingdom; the weeds are the sons of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the

harvest is the close of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the close of the age. The Son of man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and throw them into the furnace of fire; there men will weep and gnash their teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.

Here, the Lord is referring to this world as a place of testing, in which we identify ourselves, through our faith and our actions, as "children of the kingdom," or as "children of the evil one." At the "end of the age," we will be judged on the basis of our choice. Key here is the following question, "Have I discerned the will of God, and have I endeavored to follow God's will in my life?" Pertinent to our subject at hand, namely, the threat of human-induced global climate change, it would perhaps be germane to consider the following oath, which Scripture says God gave to Noah, after the Great Flood: "As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease" (Gen. 8:22).

We are also reminded of our duty to our fellow human beings through the Parable of the Last Judgement (Matt 25:31-46), which Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople connected directly to the challenge of climate change, in his September 1, 2002 Encyclical Letter for the Feast of Creation:

Recent floods in Europe, India and Russia, as well as those occurring during this year and previously in other parts of the earth, all bear witness to the disturbance of the climatic conditions caused by global warming. Such disasters have persuaded even the most incredulous persons that the problem is real, that the cost of repairing damages is comparable to the cost of preventing them, and there is simply no room left for remaining silent.

The Orthodox Church is a pioneer in her love for humanity and interest in its living conditions. Therefore, on the one hand the Church recommends that we lead virtuous lives, looking to eternal life in the heavenly world beyond. On the other hand, however, the Church also recognizes that -- according to the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ -- our virtue will not be assessed in isolation from others, but on the basis of applied solidarity with others. This is characteristically described in the parable of the Last Judgement (see Matthew 25). In this parable, the criterion for being saved and inheriting the eternal Kingdom is supplying food to the hungry, clothes to the naked, aid to the sick, and compassion to prisoners. Generally, the criterion is offering our fellow humans the possibility of living on our planet under normal conditions and of coming to know God in order to enter His Kingdom.

This means that the protection of our fellow human beings from destructive floods, fires, storms, tempests and other such disasters is our binding duty. Consequently, our failure to assume appropriate measures for avoiding such phenomena is reckoned as an unpaid debt and constitutes a crime of negligence, incurring a plethora of other crimes, such as the death of innocent people, the loss of homes and crops, and the destruction of cultural monuments and other property.

Lest we excuse ourselves from responsibility for this problem of "applied solidarity," by imagining that it is solely up to governments and international organizations to mitigate the threat of global warming, Patriarch Bartholomew goes on to remind us:

Nevertheless, what contributes most of all to the creation of this ecological crisis is the excessive waste of energy by isolated individuals. The reduction of wasteful consumption will ease the acuteness of the problem, while the increased use of renewable sources of energy will intermittently contribute to its

alleviation. However insignificant the contribution of any individual may be in averting further catastrophe to the natural environment, we are all called and obliged as individuals to do whatever we can. Only then can we confidently pray to God that He may supply what is lacking in our efforts and efficacy.

We paternally urge everyone to come to the realization of their personal responsibility and to all that is possible in order to avert global warming and environmental aggravation.

4) The world as the object of God's saving work.

Most of the time that Jesus refers to "the world" in the gospels, it has a negative connotation, as we have seen. In John 3:16-17, however, He gives the term a different cast: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him."

This passage is echoed in the words that the Samaritan villagers say to the woman at the well: "It is no longer because of your words that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Savior of the world." " (John 4:42). Granted, the primary foci in these verses is the world of humanity, not creation in general -- since, among all the creatures of the earth, only humans are capable of conscious belief -- but the cosmic dimension is there, nonetheless. This becomes even more explicit in St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans 8:19-23:

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.

Bishop Irineu Pop of the Romanian Orthodox Church beautifully connects this passage to the Orthodox understanding of what happens during worship:

The whole of the universe worships and offers gifts to its Creator. In the very shape of the churches and the placing of icons, mosaics or frescoes within them, we find a microcosm of the universe which clarifies the role both of humanity and the rest of creation in relation to God. For it is an expression not just of what is on earth today, but of what exists in heaven and what is to come: the eschatological promise and redemptive transformation of all creation through the salvation wrought by Jesus Christ [cf. Rom. 8].

The psalms tell us of the sanctification of all creation. Every day at Vespers, we sing Psalm 103 which says, "Bless the Lord, all His works. In all places of His dominion, bless the Lord, O my soul." It is captured in our blessing for all manner of elements of creation. The blessing of the waters shows us the sanctifying and redemptive power given to an element of creation through the invocation of the Holy Spirit by the Church.

What is important for us, however, is that the baptismal water represents the matter of the cosmos, the world as life of man. And its blessing at the beginning of the baptismal rite acquires thus a truly cosmic and redemptive significance. God created the world and blessed it and gave it to us as our food and life,

as the means of communion with Him. The blessing of water signifies the return or redemption of matter to this initial and essential meaning. By accepting the baptism of John, Christ sanctified the water -- made it the water of purification and reconciliation with God. It was then, as Christ was coming out of the water, that the Epiphany -- the new and redemptive manifestation of God -- took place, and the Spirit of God, Who at the beginning of creation "moved upon the face of the waters," that is, the world -- transformed it again into what He made it at the beginning: "Confer upon these water the grace of redemption, the blessing of Jordan. Make it a source of incorruption, a gift of sanctification, a remission of sins, a protection against disease, a destruction to demons, inaccessible to the adverse powers and filled with angelic might...."

In invoking God's blessing upon the baptismal font, then, the priest asks God to make real once again this cosmic act of sanctification of His material creation. Through the medium of this world's water, the initiate is brought into the presence of God's Kingdom, which is "not from this world" (John 18:36). Here is a great mystery: the transformation of creation has already begun -- it was inaugurated by Christ through His Incarnation, Death, and Resurrection. But we mustn't think that all these events have no relationship at all to our lives, as sinful or mundane as they may be. For through the sacraments of the Church, which express our faith, we, too, participate in Christ's saving work; through grace, we are transformed from within. The Kingdom of God is "breaking through;" God's love has changed us, and our world, forever. The "climate of fear" that characterizes this fallen world is changed into a "climate of grace," as "perfect love casts out fear" (I John 4:18).

This is the world that God has given so much to save; this is the world of which Christ is the life, and the light. Our modern consumerist lifestyle, which has brought on the threat of global climate change, is so luxurious, so comfortable, so familiar. But it also promises to bring death to countless innocents, now and even more so in future years. "Choose life, that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying his voice, and cleaving to him" Moses said to the children of Israel (Deut. 30:19-20). God's will in this case seems quite clear. What, then, will we choose?

Father Bender is Parish Priest of Assumption Greek Orthodox Church, Morgantown, West Virginia. He currently serves as Chair of the Steering Committee of the Orthodox Fellowship of the Transfiguration.

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Here are some ideas about what you and I can do, to reduce global climate change (adapted from "Fifty-Two Ways to Tread More Lightly on God's Earth," by Jane Easterly, Restoring Creation Enabler, Presbytery of Chicago, United Presbyterian Church):

1. Use less. Use less electricity, gasoline, food, & water. The average U.S. citizen consumes 100 times as much of the world's resources as the average person in the world's poorest countries.
2. Reuse things. Every five years, the average American produces a mound of waste equal to the mass of the Statue of Liberty! Wear things out before discarding them, and if you have an item you don't need anymore, don't throw it away -- give it to someone who does need it.
3. Recycle what can't be reused. Even if it's too much trouble to recycle your batteries and food scraps,

it's easy to recycle newspaper, glass, and aluminum cans. Recycling some of your waste is much better than recycling none. More than a ton of waste per person living in the U.S. is generated every year!

4. Buy recycled products. It is far more efficient to make new items out of recycled material than new material. For example, it takes only half as much energy to create a new aluminum can out of recycled aluminum as it does to produce one from newly extracted ore, and it takes 60% less energy to make new paper from recycled paper than it does to manufacture paper from a newly cut tree. But if we don't buy recycled products, manufacturers will have no incentive to make them.

5. Walk, skate, or bike wherever you can. Avoid using your car for short trips. When you do drive, don't circle the parking lot looking for a closer space. Park in the first available space and walk. It's healthier for you as well as the environment!

6. Plant things. Grow trees, plants and flowers in your yard if you have one or in pots in your home if you don't. Plants fight the greenhouse effect by removing carbon dioxide from the air.

7. Car pool or take public transportation. The burning of gasoline by automobiles is one of the largest producers of carbon dioxide, as well as carbon monoxide, in the atmosphere. If 1% of U.S. car owners didn't use their cars one day a week, 42 million gallons less gas would be burnt!

8. Support groups that seek environmental justice. Give them your time, money, and moral support.

9. Drive slower. As your speed increases, so does wind resistance, causing you to use more gas.

10. Lower your standard of living. Do you really need another TV, VCR, or whatever? It takes energy and resources to make all of those things. Per capita consumption of energy resources is higher in the U.S. than anywhere else in the world. Fewer than 5% of the Earth's people live in the U.S., and yet we consume 25% of the oil produced each year in the world, 30% of the aluminum, 30% of the silver, 40% of the lead, 40% of the platinum, and on and on.

11. Don't use hot water when cold water will do. And keep a pitcher of water in the refrigerator so you don't have to run the tap to get the water cold.

12. Buy a fuel-efficient car and appliances. Less energy used means less carbon dioxide going into the atmosphere. In the past century, the amount of carbon dioxide in the air has increased by an estimated 25%. Carbon dioxide traps the sun's heat in the Earth's atmosphere, possibly raising the Earth's temperature. In some parts of the world, a temperature increase of only a few degrees could make farming virtually impossible.

13. Drive a light-colored car. A light-colored car will stay cooler in the summer and will need less air conditioning.

14. Don't support companies that pollute or engage in environmentally damaging practices. About 99% of environmental spending in the U.S. goes toward pollution cleanup and only 1% to pollution prevention.

15. Stop energy leaks in your home. Install storm windows, hang heavy curtains to keep the heat out or in, and stop leaks around windows and doors with draft stoppers, caulking, and weather-stripping.

16. Put on or take off more clothes. In the winter, wear more clothing and use less energy to heat, and in

the summer wear less clothing (within reason!) and use less energy to cool.

17. Wash full loads of clothing and dishes. The same goes with drying clothes, but air dry whenever possible. Also clean out the lint———lint in the dryer filter makes the dryer consume more energy.

18. Travel light. Extra weight in your car makes it less fuel efficient.

19. Let your elected officials know that the environment matters to you. Tell them that you want more effective programs in support of reducing America's contribution to global climate change, as well as clean air, clean water, national parks, and wildlife and habitat protection. Oppose bills for energy programs that would ignore and thus exacerbate the problem.

20. Use ceiling fans instead of air conditioning to cool your home whenever possible.

21. Grow a garden and support local food-growers. Transporting food takes energy, and locally grown food is likely to be fresher. Be willing to pay more money for food grown in an environmentally friendly way. U.S. crop land loses an estimated 4.8 tons of topsoil per acre per year. Although there are ways to decrease soil loss, they do cost the farmers money.

22. Turn off the lights and use timers. Rather than leave a light on while you are at work or on vacation, use timers so they come on only when it is dark.

23. Go solar. Buy products that run on solar energy such as solar watches and calculators. The sun's energy is inexhaustible (at least for as long as there is life on Earth) and pollution-free, and the amount reaching the Earth far exceeds the world's energy needs. Research into harnessing solar energy needs to be encouraged through purchase of solar-run articles.

24. Put gasoline containing ethanol in your car. "Gasahol" is cleaner burning than gasoline, and car manufacturers need to be encouraged to find new energy sources for cars. Worldwide, an estimated 400 billion barrels of oil have been consumed throughout history, and an estimated 900 billion barrels remain. However, more than half of the consumption has occurred in the last two decades!

25. Resist advertising. An average of \$48 is spent per year per person in the world on advertising but the amount is \$448 per American! Don't give in to the lure of "new and improved" if what you have is perfectly adequate.

26. Enjoy God's creation! To know it is to love it, and the more we love our home planet the better stewards we will be.