

# The Burden of Guilt and the Imperative of Reform: Pope Francis and Patriarch Bartholomew Take Up the Challenge of Re-Spiritualizing Christianity in the Anthropocene Age

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*This article discusses the pro-environmental theology of two contemporary Christian leaders. The first is the current ecumenical patriarch of Constantinople, Bartholomew I. The second is Roman Catholicism's Pope Francis. Both leaders seek to support members of their respective churches who are working to protect the environment, and also to speak globally across cultural and religious lines. Both Bartholomew and Francis believe the crisis of climate change has deep roots in modern culture's anthropocentric ethos, and hence there must be an "apocalypse" or an unveiling of this ethos as a betrayal not only of nature but also of God the Creator. Contrary to some religious environmentalists, therefore, both Bartholomew and Francis are careful to distinguish cosmocentric theology (pantheism and animism) and theocentric cosmology (monotheism centered on the Incarnation of the Trinity in creation). Francis in particular aims for a retrieval of Saint Francis of Assisi's relationship to the natural world as it was expressed by Saint Bonaventure, and later developed by Saint Ignatius of Loyola into a discipline (asceticism) of learning to see all created things as expressions of God's glory. In rivalry with the asceticism of modern capitalism, which could be described as "disciplined avarice in action," Bartholomew and Francis advocate the classical monastic-Franciscan-Ignatian spiritual ethos of "disciplined contemplation in action."*

**Keywords:** Pope Francis, Patriarch Bartholomew, Max Weber, *Laudato Si'*, environmentalism, creation, Anthropocene, climate change

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## Introduction

IT is becoming increasingly clear that the problems of environmental degradation and climate change are rooted in human culture. The development of technologies requiring the burning of carbon-based fuels is only the expression of human ideals about living a “modern” life in an “advanced” country. There are, therefore, social, economic, and political assumptions driving the human race to alter the Earth’s environment and climate. But are there also religious assumptions at work in this process? And if religion is part of the problem, can it be part of the solution?

In 1967 the medieval historian Lynn White Jr. published his controversial essay, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis.”<sup>1</sup> In this essay he argued that Western Christianity bears a “burden of guilt” for causing the contemporary environmental crisis. “The victory of Christianity over paganism was the greatest psychic revolution in the history of our culture,” White maintained. One major consequence of this victory was that Christians desacralized and instrumentalized nature to serve human ends. In a passage with wide-ranging and long-term consequences for subsequent discussions of religion and environmentalism, White asserted the following:

Especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen. As early as the second century both Tertullian and Saint Irenaeus of Lyons were insisting that when God shaped Adam he was foreshadowing the image of the incarnate Christ, the Second Adam. Man shares, in great measure, God’s transcendence of nature. Christianity, in absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia’s religions...., not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God’s will that man exploit nature for his proper ends.... By destroying pagan animism, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects.... The spirits in natural objects, which formerly had protected nature from man, evaporated. Man’s effective monopoly was confirmed, and the old inhibitions to the exploitation of nature crumbled.... Hence

<sup>1</sup> Lynn White Jr., “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” *Science* 155, no. 3767 (March 1967): 1203–7. This essay was first given in lecture format on December 26, 1966, at the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. See also the revised 1974 reprint: White, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis [with discussion of St. Francis; reprint, 1967],” in *Ecology and Religion in History* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974). The original essay can also be found at <http://science.sciencemag.org/content/155/3767/1203>. A reformatted reprint can be found at <http://www.zbi.ee/~kalevi/lwhite.htm>.

we shall continue to have a worsening ecologic crisis until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man.<sup>2</sup>

White's critique implied that the "axiom" he identified was in fact part of Christian orthodoxy, and therefore it is central to the religion itself. He wrote, "Both our present science and our present technology are so tinctured with orthodox Christian arrogance toward nature that no solution for our ecologic crisis can be expected from them alone."<sup>3</sup> The view that Christianity *per se* is guilty is also evident when White argues that the rise of science and technology are distinctly Western and Christian:

Since both science and technology are blessed words in our contemporary vocabulary, some may be happy at the notions, first, that viewed historically, modern science is an extrapolation of natural theology and, second, that modern technology is at least partly to be explained as an Occidental, voluntarist realization of the Christian dogma of man's transcendence of, and rightful master over, nature. But, as we now recognize, somewhat over a century ago science and technology—hitherto quite separate activities—joined to give mankind powers which, to judge by many of the ecologic effects, are out of control. If so, Christianity bears a huge burden of guilt. I personally doubt that disastrous ecologic backlash can be avoided simply by applying to our problems more science and more technology. Our science and technology have grown out of Christian attitudes toward man's relation to nature which are almost universally held not only by Christians and neo-Christians but also by those who fondly regard themselves as post-Christians.<sup>4</sup>

In the decades after White made these claims the subsequent conversations about them have been vigorous and inclusive of many voices.<sup>5</sup> Some voices

<sup>2</sup> White, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," 1205.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 1205–7.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 1205–6.

<sup>5</sup> See the book series *The Religions of the World and Ecology*, from the Center for the Study of World Religions, Harvard Divinity School, published by Harvard University Press in 1997–2004 and edited by Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim. See also the recent scholarship on the field of religion and ecology in the peer-reviewed academic journal *Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture, and Ecology*, ed. Christopher Key Chapple. See too the encyclopedia *The Spirit of Sustainability*, ed. Willis Jenkins (Great Barrington, MA: Berkshire Publishing Group, 2009); and *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, ed. Bron Raymond Taylor (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2008). Taylor also led the effort to form the International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture, which was established in 2006 and began publishing the quarterly *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture* in 2007. I am indebted for many of the secondary references in the following three paragraphs to the research in the fine unpublished paper by Steven Bouma-Prediger, "Is Christianity to Blame? The Ecological Complaint against

have been completely disdainful of White's thesis.<sup>6</sup> Other voices have partially accepted White's critique, and they chastise the Christian churches for patterns of thought and action that bear guilt for the current ecological situation. These voices accept the main lines of White's indictment of the Christian tradition, but not his negativity about either the Christian Bible or Christian orthodoxy. Instead, they call for a reform of Christians, not Christianity; they call for repentance among Christians but not necessarily a rewriting of the core of the faith.<sup>7</sup> For example, Wendell Berry, while acknowledging that the criticism of Christianity as negligent is fair and just, maintains that the problem is not the religion itself but its members' own failures to live according to proper biblical teachings.<sup>8</sup>

Christianity," presented at Hope College Creation Care Conference, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, October 30–31, 2009, [http://apps.sebts.edu/chapel/chapelMessages.cfm?filter\\_semesterid=0&filter\\_sortdirection=ASC&Page=49](http://apps.sebts.edu/chapel/chapelMessages.cfm?filter_semesterid=0&filter_sortdirection=ASC&Page=49).

- <sup>6</sup> The philosopher Martin Schönfeld expresses a typical criticism: "White overstates his point. Blaming Christianity for environmental decline is akin to blaming parents for the deeds of children. This may be correct as long as offspring remain in parental custody, but it makes little sense when children come of age. Science and technology no longer answered to religious authority when they joined forces in the Industrial Revolution and spawned the ecological crisis." Martin Schönfeld, "The Future of Faith: Climate Change and the Future of Religions," in *Religion in Environmental and Climate Change: Suffering, Values, Lifestyles*, ed. Dieter Gerten and Sigurd Bergmann (New York: Continuum, 2012), 154. The perspective that Christianity is part of the solution, not the cause of problem, also finds expression in the teachings of a consortium of two hundred American scientists who are also Evangelical Christians; see "Evangelical Scientists Call for Climate Action," *Sojourners*, July 10, 2013; their letter to the US Congress, which in no way holds the Christian tradition responsible for climate change, but which cites the Bible as if it is unequivocally in favor of proenvironmental stands, can be found at <https://sojo.net/sites/default/files/Evangelical%20Scientists%20Initiative%20Letter.pdf>.
- <sup>7</sup> See, for example, James Nash, who speaks for many Christians when he writes, "It will not do to draw a neat distinction between Christianity and Christendom, between the faith itself and perversions of it by its practitioners. That distinction may be formally or logically true, as I agree, but it is facile and unconvincing when applied to history. We cannot so easily distinguish between the faith and the faithful. The fact is that Christianity—as interpreted and affirmed by billions of its adherents over the centuries and in official doctrines and theological exegeses—has been ecologically tainted... . The bottom line is that Christianity itself cannot escape an indictment for ecological negligence and abuse." James Nash, *Loving Nature: Ecological Integrity and Christian Responsibility* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991), 72.
- <sup>8</sup> Wendell Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom, and Community* (New York: Pantheon, 1993), 94–96. See also Robert Booth Fowler's helpful survey, *The Greening of Protestant Thought* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

Other voices have affirmed and amplified White's views on the problems with Christianity in its core orthodoxy, laying most of the blame for environmental degradation and climate change on the fundamental assumptions and teachings of institutional Christianity.<sup>9</sup> Even before White, the English historian Arnold Toynbee was blaming monotheism for pollution and the overconsumption of natural resources, and enjoining Western civilization to return to pantheism.<sup>10</sup> Following Toynbee and White's lead, some critics have argued that the Bible and the Christian orthodoxy derived from it are inherently pernicious to humanity's relationship to nature. These voices contend that the Bible teaches God and nature are different, and this metaphysical dualism poisons humanity's fundamental attitude toward the Earth and its ecosystem. To worship and love God, the critics insist, necessarily implies humans must hate all else, including the Earth itself. This hatred takes form as an attitude of domination and subjugation, as if the Earth deserved only our contempt because it is not our object of worship.<sup>11</sup> Couple that, the critics continue, with the injunction in Genesis 1:28 to "subdue" the Earth, and we have an anthropocentrically caused environmental disaster waiting to happen.<sup>12</sup> The roots of modern science (putting nature "on the rack" and "torturing [her] for her secrets" in the infamous, and probably misattributed, line of Francis Bacon) and technology are inherently Christian, the critics charge, just as White asserted.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>9</sup> For example, the environmental philosopher Max Oelschlaeger declared, "The roots of my prejudice against religion... grew out of my reading of Lynn White's famous essay blaming Judeo-Christianity for the environmental crisis." Max Oelschlaeger, *Caring for Creation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), 2.

<sup>10</sup> Arnold Toynbee, "The Religious Background of the Present Environmental Crisis," in *Ecology and Religion in History*, ed. David Spring and Eileen Spring (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 146.

<sup>11</sup> John Passmore writes, "Christianity has encouraged man to think of himself as nature's absolute master, for whom everything that exists was designed." John Passmore, *Man's Responsibility for Nature* (New York: Scribner's, 1974), 12–13. The feminist Christian theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether makes a similar argument in *New Women/New Earth* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 195.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Roderick Nash, *The Rights of Nature* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 90; Wallace Stegner, *Marking the Sparrow's Fall* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1999), 121; and Ian McHarg, "The Place of Nature in the City of Man," in *Western Man and Environmental Ethics*, ed. Ian Barbour (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1973), 174–75.

<sup>13</sup> The full Bacon quote runs as follows: "My only earthly wish is ... to stretch the deplorably narrow limits of man's dominion over the universe to their promised bounds ... [nature will be] bound into service, hounded in her wanderings and put on the rack and tortured for her secrets." Aside from whether Bacon himself really wrote this line, it has been taken by many to express well a Christian philosophical view of nature.

Among these highly critical voices against both the Christian Bible and its orthodox interpretation, there is a rough consensus that something like Toynbee's call for a return to pantheism has much merit.<sup>14</sup> Traditional Christianity must be abolished or at least seriously reinvented to align it with efforts to protect the environment, even if that means transforming Christianity into nature worship; there are always philosophies ready to hand for these reinvention projects.<sup>15</sup> Other critics thinking along the lines of abolishing or radically transforming Christianity call for a post-Christian secularism; only a form of antireligion religion can save us from the worst consequences of our despoiling of nature and altering the Earth's climate.<sup>16</sup> In both visions of religious reform, the animist and the secularist, we find the assumption that Christianity can only play a constructive role in dealing with the crisis of climate change if it is significantly changed into something it has never been before.

Unlike some of his readers, White himself did not think that either a backward-looking animism or a forward-looking secularism was a viable answer to the environmental crisis. He believed Christianity had the resources within its own spiritual tradition to cease playing a destructive role, and indeed to move toward becoming a constructive force for positive change. More specifically, White advocated a radical spiritual reform of Christianity to reinvent it along the lines of "the greatest spiritual revolutionary in Western history," Saint Francis of Assisi. "The key to an understanding of Francis," White explained, "is his belief in the virtue of humility—not merely for the individual but for man as a species. Francis tried to depose

<sup>14</sup> For some examples, see the survey of new "dark green religions" in Bron Taylor, *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009). A manifesto of this perspective is Starhawk's *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Goddess* (1979; New York: HarperCollins, 1999).

<sup>15</sup> John W. Cooper, *Panentheism: The Other God of the Philosophers—From Plato to the Present* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006). This reinvention of Christianity has been clearly articulated and performed by Philip Clayton and Arthur Peacocke in their book *In Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being: Panentheistic Reflections on God's Presence in a Scientific World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004). See also Donald A. Crosby, *A Religion of Nature* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002).

<sup>16</sup> Fairly or not, this school of thought is associated with Paul M. van Buren and his book *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel Based on an Analysis of Its Language* (New York: Macmillan, 1966). Often Gabriel Vahanian and Thomas J. J. Altizer and other "death of God" theologians are associated with this perspective. For a discussion of this school, see Whitney A. Bauman, "Destabilizing Religion: The Death of God, a Viable Agnosticism, and the Embrace of Polydoxy," chap. 3 in *Religion and Ecology: Developing a Planetary Ethic* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 63–84.

man from his monarchy over creation and set up a democracy of all God's creatures. With him the ant is no longer simply a homily for the lazy, flames a sign of the thrust of the soul toward union with God; now they are Brother Ant and Sister Fire, praising the Creator in their own ways as Brother Man does in his."<sup>17</sup> White concludes his essay contending that because the roots of the current ecological crisis are in religion, the solution "must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not. We must rethink and refeel [*sic*] our nature and destiny. The profoundly religious, but heretical, sense of the primitive Franciscans for the spiritual autonomy of all parts of nature may point a direction. I propose Francis as a patron saint for ecologists."<sup>18</sup>

White's critique of Christianity certainly has received widespread attention and debate, which has motivated many Christians to rethink the whole question along theological lines, not simply in terms of moral action and repentance.<sup>19</sup> It might be noted, however, that generally many of these authors blur the distinction between cosmocentric theology and theocentric cosmology; the former moves in the direction of Toynbee's pantheistic reinterpretation of Christianity, while the latter moves in the direction of classical Trinitarian monotheism. Critics of White often fail to see that he obscures this distinction and they tend to obscure it too. Yet the resources for making this distinction are implied in White's retrieval of Saint Francis, which is both cruder and subtler than some readers have noticed. His rhetoric against "orthodoxy" notwithstanding, White rules out neither biblical monotheism properly understood nor the incarnational and Trinitarian substratum of classical Christian orthodoxy. His advocacy of a Franciscan retrieval (even if he labels it "heretical") suggests a particular positive interpretation of the biblical and orthodox tradition. Given that Francis of Assisi is a canonized saint in the Western church, and his disciple and biographer Saint Bonaventure is a "Doctor of the Church" in Roman Catholicism, White's call for a Franciscan renaissance is not necessarily heretical or even heterodox. This is a point too often overlooked by both White's adversaries and his acolytes. Wright's proposal to reinvent Christianity along specifically Franciscan lines has generated some discussion—notably the important work of Jame Schaefer at Marquette University. There continues to be, though, a blurring of the

<sup>17</sup> White, "The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis," 1206.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 1207.

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, the work of the Forum on Religion and Ecology at Yale (<http://fore.yale.edu>). Mary Evelyn Tucker, who with John Grim leads this group, has written several important books. See her *Ecology and Religion* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2014). See also Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, eds., *Living Cosmology: Christian Responses to Journey of the Universe* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2016).

distinction between cosmocentric theology and theocentric cosmology, with a concomitant overlooking of the classical monotheistic and antipanthestic metaphysics underlying Trinitarian and Christological orthodoxy.<sup>20</sup> In other words, the song of a Franciscan retrieval is not often sung in a distinctively Bonaventurean key, but it could very well be.

I will analyze, therefore, the proenvironmental theology and anticlimate change activism of the two contemporary Christian leaders who sing in a Bonaventurean key. Their ideas on the environment and Christianity's role in helping to protect it are surprisingly similar to White's own vision of Franciscan revival. However, unlike White and many of his friendlier Christian critics, both figures are careful to distinguish cosmocentric theology and theocentric cosmology. The first leader is the current ecumenical patriarch of Constantinople, Bartholomew I. The context and background of this article is the very public work of Patriarch Bartholomew since the early 1990s to raise awareness about environmental and climate issues, and to do so in a particularly Orthodox theological key. The second leader under discussion is Pope Francis, who, since becoming leader of the world's 1.2 billion Roman Catholics, has made no secret of his friendship with and admiration for Patriarch Bartholomew. Their meeting in November 2014 signaled a strong mutual desire to work together on finding common ground for reuniting the Eastern and Western churches. It is not unreasonable to believe that cooperation on environmental and climate change issues is central to their shared ecumenical vision.

The first purpose of discussing these two Christian leaders is to explain that it is reasonable to read Bartholomew and Francis as sharing a common intellectual strategy to achieve two goals. The first goal is intramural, and the second is extramural. We can read each author as seeking to persuade the rank and file of their respective churches to participate in the wider, global dialogue about how organized religion can play a constructive role in dealing

<sup>20</sup> In the realm of Catholic theology specifically, several Roman Catholic authors have challenged White's thesis and the many permutations of it presented by his defenders. See Jame Schaefer, *Theological Foundations for Environmental Ethics: Reconstructing Patristic and Medieval Concepts* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2009); Schaefer, *Confronting the Climate Crisis: Catholic Theological Perspectives* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2011); Tobias L. Winwright, *Green Discipleship: Catholic Theological Ethics and the Environment* (Winona, MN: Anselm Academic Christian Brothers Publications, 2011); Jame Schaefer and Tobias Winwright, eds., *Environmental Justice and Climate Change: Assessing Pope Benedict XVI's Ecological Vision for the Catholic Church in the United States* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013); Erin Lothes Biviano, *Inspired Sustainability: Planting Seeds for Action* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2016). Interested readers might also consult the work of the Catholic Climate Covenant, <http://www.catholicclimatecovenant.org>.



with environmental destruction and climate change, and to give institutional support and encouragement to those who are already vigorously participating. Secondly, we can read each religious leader as endeavoring to gain respect for Orthodox and Catholic Christianity in the eyes of concerned environmentalists—Protestants, non-Christians of all types, even secularists—as a credible and sophisticated participant in efforts to save the Earth from humanly made catastrophe. This is why they speak and write not only to members of their own churches, but to the entire human race. Their audience is broad because they are discussing matters that ultimately concern all people on Earth.

My second purpose is to examine these two goals more closely. Bartholomew and Francis are both to a certain extent concerned with internal church reform and with conciliatory ecumenical and public relations maneuvers. However, that way of framing their work is too superficial. The more substantive and interesting question is not what they are doing, but why they are doing it. In their environmental writings they certainly preach prevention, but what is most relevant—and this is particularly clear when they are read together—is their message about living with the disease. The plague of climate change is upon us, and we cannot stop it now. However, we can limit its destructiveness over time and move forward with greater resistance to further environmental degradation. Both Bartholomew and Francis believe the crisis of climate change has deep roots in modern culture's values, and hence there must be an "apocalypse" or an unveiling of these roots. This will then facilitate the long process of uprooting the poison weeds that led to this crisis and replanting slowly, tediously, and conscientiously a new ethos for postmodern humanity.

To understand what they are doing, it is important to see that both Bartholomew and Francis are committed to a distinct species within the genus of what contemporary philosopher Dale Jamieson calls "an ethics for the Anthropocene."<sup>21</sup> Like Jamieson, both Bartholomew and Francis turn our attention away from questions of policy and diplomacy, technology and geoeengineering, economics and energy production; each author believes all these questions matter tremendously, but they also agree that the gravity and magnitude of humanity's collective plight dwarf them all. All three writers turn their readers toward what they take to be the more fundamental questions of a "new" ethos for a new age.

Bartholomew and Francis are a unique species within the "ethics of the Anthropocene" camp because their proposal is a hybrid of old and new

<sup>21</sup> Dale Jamieson, *Reason in a Dark Time: Why the Struggle against Climate Change Failed—And What It Means for Our Future* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 185–88.

Christian teachings. What they retrieve from Christianity's complex past, and what they choose to ignore or repudiate, are both worth pondering. But even more intriguing is their collaborative innovation with what they retrieve. They develop something that can be termed a "green apocalyptic" ethos for the Anthropocene age. It is "green" insofar as it is marketed as an ameliorating and prophylactic response to the crisis of climate change and the destruction of the natural environment. It is "apocalyptic" in that it is an ethos meant to be a prophetic sign of contradiction to the anthropocentric ethos of our time; it is an ethos that proclaims God alone rules, and rebellion will not be without dire consequences. It is an ethos that is in but not of the Anthropocene age. Finally, it is "apocalyptic" in the sense that it is a robust theocentric alternative to any purely cosmocentric ethos (or a basic "respect for nature," as Jamieson banally terms it) of many seeking a "green" alternative for life in the shadow of catastrophic climate change. Its "apocalyptic" approach challenges the cosmocentric "respect for nature" approach by taking very seriously the wrath of God as an interpretive lens for the looming catastrophe. A "green apocalyptic" ethos seeks a redemption from the catastrophe that can only come from outside humankind and nature.

Paradoxically, and in a uniquely orthodox Christian move, Bartholomew and Francis think the "green apocalyptic" ethos for the Anthropocene age is a way of life that comes both from above and from below. It is cosmological in the sense of refusing to tolerate any longer the eclipse of nature by anthropocentric solipsism. Yet it is a theocentric cosmology because it presents a way of life centered on the belief in and commitment to continuing the Incarnation of the Jewish (monotheistic) God in the creation begun with Jesus Christ. This ethos is old in that it was genuinely demonstrated in the lives of the saints of yesterday (Saint Francis of Assisi receives the pope's central attention and recommendation). This ethos is new insofar as it will be made real today by authentic saintliness that reads and responds to the signs of the times. Following God's incarnational plan, both Bartholomew and Francis contend, can save creation despite the damage we have done to its life-supporting ecosystem.

### *The Sin of Environmental Destruction*

Bartholomew has been writing and speaking about environmental issues for more than twenty-five years and has created a substantial body of texts.<sup>22</sup> His prodigious work in his area has inspired a whole subgenre in

<sup>22</sup> A bibliography and links to the patriarch's publications, speeches, addresses, and other documents can be found at <https://www.patriarchate.org/publications>. Bartholomew's

Orthodox theology.<sup>23</sup> Bartholomew accepts the validity of the current scientific consensus on human-caused climate change. As early as 2005 he said, “Climate change and environmental pollution affect everyone. While the data may be variously debated, the situation is clearly unsettling. To take but one example: Dramatic increases of greenhouse gases in our atmosphere—largely due to fossil fuel burning—are causing global warming and in turn leading to melting ice caps, rising sea levels, the spread of disease, drought, and famine. . . . It is painfully evident that our response to the scientific testimony has been generally reluctant and gravely inadequate. Unless we take radical and immediate measures to reduce emissions stemming from unsustainable—in fact, unjustifiable, if not simply unjust—excesses in the demands of our lifestyle, the impact will be both alarming and imminent.”<sup>24</sup> Since then he has not changed his opinion, but has repeatedly restated and amplified it.<sup>25</sup> His theological perspective about the looming catastrophe predicted by scientists was summed up in the same talk from 2005:

most focused, full-length discussion of environmental issues can be found in his two books, *On Earth as in Heaven: Ecological Vision and Initiatives of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew*, ed. John Chryssavgis (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), and *In the World, Yet Not of the World: Social and Global Initiatives of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew*, ed. John Chryssavgis and Jos Manuel Barroso (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009). A collection of his speeches, letters, and other writings on the environment from 1991 to 2007 can be found in *Cosmic Grace, Humble Prayer: The Ecological Vision of the Green Patriarch Bartholomew*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009).

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Elizabeth Theokritoff, *Living in God’s Creation: Orthodox Perspectives on Ecology* (New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2009). See also the collection of essays in John Chryssavgis and Bruce V. Foltz, eds., *Toward an Ecology of Transfiguration: Orthodox Christian Perspectives on Environment, Nature, and Creation* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013).

<sup>24</sup> Patriarch Bartholomew, *On Earth as in Heaven*, 211.

<sup>25</sup> See Patriarch Bartholomew, “Creation Care and Ecological Justice: Reflections by Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew,” an address given at The Oxford Union, November 4, 2015, <https://www.patriarchate.org/-/creation-care-and-ecological-justice-reflections-by-ecumenical-patriarch-bartholomew?inheritRedirect=true&redirect=%2Faddresses>. In 2013 at the Conference of the Parties of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, Bartholomew said, “Scientists talk of ‘tipping points’ and ‘abrupt climate change.’ Political leaders talk of the ‘challenges’ that lie ahead. Scripture speaks of human crisis and God’s forgiving grace. All three make it clear that the time will come when we must face consequences; the time will come when it is simply too late.” “Patriarch Bartholomew Urges Leaders to Act Now on Climate Change,” November 15, 2013, <http://zenit.org/articles/patriarch-bartholomew-urges-leaders-to-act-now-on-climate-change/>.

Religious leaders throughout the world recognize that climate change is much more than an issue of environmental preservation. Insofar as it is human induced, it is a profoundly moral and spiritual problem. To persist in the current path of ecological destruction is not only folly. It is no less than suicidal, jeopardizing the diversity of the very earth we inhabit, enjoy, and share. Indeed, we have repeatedly described it as a sin against both the Creator and the creation.<sup>26</sup>

Indeed, Bartholomew makes the innovative move of interpreting the “sheep and the goats” parable of Last Judgment in Matthew 25:31–46 in terms of environmental protection. He writes, “A Church that neglects to pray for the natural environment is a Church that refuses to offer food and drink to humanity. At the same time, a society that ignores the mandate to care for all human beings is a society that mistreats the very creation of God, including the natural environment. It is tantamount to blasphemy.”<sup>27</sup>

The theme of the sinfulness of humanity’s destruction of the environment runs through all of Bartholomew’s writings and speeches on ecology. “We have traditionally regarded sin as being merely what people do to other people,” he explains. “Yet, for human beings to destroy the biological diversity in God’s creation; for human beings to degrade the integrity of the earth by contributing to climate change, by stripping the earth of its natural forests or destroying its wetlands; for human beings to contaminate the earth’s waters, land and air—all of these are sins.”<sup>28</sup>

The root of these sins is not greed or avarice, as one might expect—these sins are more the fruit than the root of the problem. Instead Bartholomew’s attention is on pride, vainglory, and something like human narcissism in relation to the rest of the cosmos and in relation to our posterity. In other words, he opposes anthropocentrism that either forgets cosmology and theology, or that subordinates them to its human-centered imperial thinking. He writes, “The word ‘ecology’ contains the prefix ‘eco,’ which derives from the Greek word *oikos*, signifying ‘home’ or ‘dwelling.’ How unfortunate, then, and indeed how selfish it is that we have reduced its meaning and restricted its application. This world is indeed our home. Yet it is also the home of everyone, just as it is the home of every animal creature and of every form of life created by God. It is a sign of arrogance to presume that we human beings alone inhabit this world. Moreover, it is a sign of arrogance to imagine that only the present generation enjoys its resources.”<sup>29</sup> His point here is

<sup>26</sup> Patriarch Bartholomew, *On Earth as in Heaven*, 211.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

theocentric: humans must see themselves and the natural world as “created by God” and then think and act accordingly. This is why environmental concern is for him “deeply spiritual”—environmental destruction is rooted in “selfishness” and “arrogance” and a mentality of entitlement that knows no limits.<sup>30</sup> Bartholomew writes that the “tragic reality” of our current environmental situation is humanity’s overinflated sense of its own self-importance to the eclipse of all else. “The arrogant apostasy of humanity from the deeper reason of its relationship with our divine Creator’s creation,” he explains, “incites the presumptuous and improper exploitation of the ecological environment.”<sup>31</sup> Hence there cannot be a technological or a merely economic solution, but only a “deeper repentance for our wrongful and wasteful ways.”<sup>32</sup> The problem is something like collective megalomania, and the solution requires something like radical humility, both collectively and as individuals.

Pope Francis’ encyclical letter *Laudato Si’* contains all these same themes. Like Bartholomew, Francis accepts the validity of the current scientific consensus on human-caused climate change.<sup>33</sup> However, although they are similar in content he presents views on the causes of this looming catastrophe in a more philosophical voice. In a discourse that is similar to mid-twentieth-century Heideggerian philosophy tinged with Martin Buber’s “personalist” theology of the I-Thou, Francis explains that the problem at the root of the environmental crisis is our basic existential disposition in relation to the world around us. The problem is not that we lack the proper science or technology to prevent or solve environmental catastrophes. The problem is that we have almost unconsciously allowed science and technology to determine our fundamental attitude toward nature, other people, and even God. A host of deleterious consequences for nature and human society follow, such as unbridled consumerism, the false belief in unlimited economic growth, social and political inequalities, relativism, individualism, and, of course, the destruction of the Earth’s ecosystem. We have learned to think and act according to a “technocratic paradigm” that has become so ubiquitous that

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 26, 55, 61, 97, 168, 302, 313.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>33</sup> Pope Francis, Encyclical, *Laudato Si’* (On Care for Our Common Home), May 24, 2015, §§23–25, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html). Francis states, “It is true that there are other factors (such as volcanic activity, variations in the earth’s orbit and axis, the solar cycle), yet a number of scientific studies indicate that most global warming in recent decades is due to the great concentration of greenhouse gases (carbon dioxide, methane, nitrogen oxides and others) released mainly as a result of human activity” (23).

it appears simply as a commonsense way of being in the world. Francis argues the point like this:

The basic problem goes even deeper: it is the way that humanity has taken up technology and its development according to an undifferentiated and one-dimensional paradigm. This paradigm exalts the concept of a subject who, using logical and rational procedures, progressively approaches and gains control over an external object. This subject makes every effort to establish the scientific and experimental method, which in itself is already a technique of possession, mastery and transformation. It is as if the subject were to find itself in the presence of something formless, completely open to manipulation. Men and women have constantly intervened in nature, but for a long time this meant being in tune with and respecting the possibilities offered by the things themselves. It was a matter of receiving what nature itself allowed, as if from its own hand. Now, by contrast, we are the ones to lay our hands on things, attempting to extract everything possible from them while frequently ignoring or forgetting the reality in front of us. Human beings and material objects no longer extend a friendly hand to one another; the relationship has become confrontational. This has made it easy to accept the idea of infinite or unlimited growth, which proves so attractive to economists, financiers and experts in technology. It is based on the lie that there is an infinite supply of the earth's goods, and this leads to the planet being squeezed dry beyond every limit. It is the false notion that "an infinite quantity of energy and resources are available, that it is possible to renew them quickly, and that the negative effects of the exploitation of the natural order can be easily absorbed." (LS §106)

We are so dominated by this way of understanding, Francis explains, that we no longer have the ability to listen to nature, other people, or God. Instead we approach all reality reductively, with a one-size-fits-all mentality that assumes we know what we want, we know how to get it, and we will use anyone or anything to achieve our ends. Francis' term for this kind of manipulative human hubris is "anthropocentrism." He describes "anthropocentrism" as a form of "constant schizophrenia" and deranged megalomaniacal delusion that we can take the place of God over all life (LS §§117–18). He calls it a "Promethean vision of mastery over the world" and, despite his generally conciliatory tone in the writing, he stridently disdains this particular kind of mentality throughout his encyclical. It has led to "the spiral of self-destruction which currently engulfs us," but yet is also responsible for blinding us to the reality of what is happening and our role as the prime agents of massive catastrophe and species suicide (LS §116).<sup>34</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Francis' remarks about collective human "suicide" came on November 30, 2015, during a press conference aboard his papal plane en route to Rome. In reply to a question about

Like Bartholomew, however, Francis is ultimately more concerned with theological analyses than philosophical or psychological ones. Human beings deluding themselves into the blind assumption that they can take God's place as ruler of all life is not simply Promethean, suicidal, or schizophrenic: it is "sin" and "evil" to throw aside all limits and live as if we were God and Lord over all that is (LS §§8, 66, 6, 80). Francis bluntly declares against this mentality, "We are not God. The earth was here before us and it has been given to us" (LS §67). He rejects any interpretation of Genesis 1:28 that encourages human hubris and self-divinization: "Clearly the Bible has no place for a tyrannical anthropocentrism unconcerned for other creatures" (LS §68). God gave us the gift of creation, and we are expected to care for this gift, not turn it into "an immense pile of filth" uninhabitable for other species or even our own descendants (LS §21). Sounding an apocalyptic note, Francis warns, "Doomsday predictions can no longer be met with irony or disdain. We may well be leaving to coming generations debris, desolation and filth.... We need to reflect on our accountability before those who will have to endure the dire consequences" (LS §161). He does not, but easily could have, drawn the same connection Bartholomew did between the story of Last Judgment in Matthew 25 and what humans are doing to the Earth and their own descendants today. Francis clearly believes deafness to the "least" among us, deafness to the "cry of the earth and the cry of the poor," are rooted in the same sin, and it is likely he also believes it will be met with the same response from God at the end of time (LS §49).<sup>35</sup>

### *A Redemptive Ethos for the Anthropocene Age*

The irony of the title "Anthropocene age" for discussing the worldviews of Bartholomew and Francis is that they think the answer to our current predicament is to be in the Anthropocene age but not of it. They want to acknowledge that we are in a wholly new epoch in which humans have caused mass extinctions of animal and plant species, filled the oceans with pollution, and

what was at stake in the upcoming climate change conference in Paris, Francis said, "I am not sure, but I can say to you 'now or never.' Every year the problems are getting worse. We are at the limits. If I may use a strong word I would say that we are at the limits of suicide."

<sup>35</sup> See also LS §§53, 70, 117 and the "Christian Prayer in Union with Creation" in §246. On creation as one of the "least," Francis writes, "Every creature is thus the object of the Father's tenderness, who gives it its place in the world. Even the fleeting life of the least of beings is the object of his love, and in its few seconds of existence, God enfolds it with his affection" (LS §77).

changed the climate of the Earth in ways that are likely to be long lasting and extremely deadly and destructive of human civilization as we know it. In the Anthropocene age, the human “footprint” on the Earth’s ecosystem is like a huge mass grave. However, although they know we are in dire straits, neither Bartholomew nor Francis thinks that the situation is hopeless—though their perspectives can hardly be considered optimistic. Each leader calls for a spiritual revival based on radical repentance and a complete embrace of a simpler, more ascetic lifestyle.<sup>36</sup> Bartholomew has written (and Francis cites this very passage in *Laudato Si’*):

We are treating our planet in an inhuman, godless manner precisely because we fail to see it as a gift inherited from above. Our original sin with regard to the natural environment lies in our refusal to accept the world as a sacrament of communion, as a way of sharing with God and neighbor on a global scale. It is our humble conviction that divine and human meet in the slightest detail contained in the seamless garment of God’s creation, in the last speck of dust.<sup>37</sup>

If serious repentance and the development of a mystical sensibility that sees God in every speck of dust are required to address the roots of the problem, then reasonable people can be forgiven for wondering if this is realistic. Indeed, some have even wondered if Francis’ analysis of the issue is not only unrealistic but also dangerously subversive of modern civilization because of its unworldly religious naïveté.<sup>38</sup>

It could be asked, however, if perhaps the alternative ethos advocated by Bartholomew and Francis is more realistic than we might initially suspect. After all, there is something very old about their version of an “ethics of the Anthropocene.” They are rearticulating a form of traditional Christianity that has been present always in the history of their churches, but that has

<sup>36</sup> See Patriarch Bartholomew, *On Earth as in Heaven*, 52, 61, 74, 125, 132, 201, 213; also LS §§9, 218.

<sup>37</sup> Patriarch Bartholomew, *On Earth as in Heaven*, 12.

<sup>38</sup> This is the opinion of the American editorialist David Brooks. He writes, “Pope Francis is a wonderful example of how to be a truly good person. But if we had followed his line of analysis, neither the Asian economic miracle nor the technology-based American energy revolution would have happened. There’d be no awareness that though industrialization can lead to catastrophic pollution in the short term (China), over the long haul both people and nature are better off with technological progress, growth and regulated affluence. The innocence of the dove has to be accompanied by the wisdom of the serpent—the awareness that programs based on the purity of the heart backfire; the irony that the best social programs harvest the low but steady motivations of people as they actually are.” See David Brooks, “Fracking and the Franciscans,” *New York Times*, June 23, 2015, [www.nytimes.com/2015/06/23/opinion/fracking-and-the-franciscans.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/23/opinion/fracking-and-the-franciscans.html).



not always been a well-known or dominant force. Their retrieval of a particular minority strand of Christianity might well be shrewder than some critics grant. Their proposal for a new ethos for the Anthropocene age combines old and new Christian teachings; it has the trusted pedigree of all things that attain the status of classic, but it is unusual enough to command attention as something fresh and relevant to this epoch in history. What they retrieve from Christianity's complex past, and what they choose to ignore or repudiate, are both worth pondering.

What then are Bartholomew and Francis proposing? The answer is implied in the texts previously noted. They are calling for a spiritual revival based on radical repentance and a complete embrace of simpler, more ascetic lifestyles. Francis calls for a new model of education in "responsible simplicity of life, in grateful contemplation of God's world, and in concern for the needs of the poor and the protection of the environment" (LS §214). This way of life would reverse what they call "our refusal to accept the world as a sacrament of communion" and would turn us toward a new form of attunement with the divine presence everywhere, even "in the last speck of dust." Their approach to environmental destruction and climate change is asceticism and mysticism, but their contemplative sacramentalism is a clue that they are not being other-worldly or escapist. If we look more closely at what they mean, and do not mean, with this call, then perhaps we can better appreciate the possibility that they are involved in a shrewd project that is eminently this-worldly and realistic.

If it is not realistic to assume that some form of asceticism can have a massive influence on whole societies, and even whole civilizations, we have to ask why capitalism has been so widely successful. Max Weber was essentially correct in his general contention that capitalism is animated by a desire to recover the ascetic ethos scrubbed from Protestant tradition by Calvinist Puritan doctrines of predestination and polemics against "works righteousness."<sup>39</sup> Writing in 1904, Weber explains:

A constituent part of the capitalist spirit, and not only this but of modern culture, namely, the rational conduct of life on the foundation of the *idea of calling*, was born ... out of the spirit of *Christian asceticism*... The essential elements of the attitude which is... the "spirit of capitalism" are precisely those which we found to be the content of Puritan asceticism of the calling, only *without* the religious foundations.... The Puritans

<sup>39</sup> Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Peter Baehr and Gordon C. Wells (New York: Penguin Classics, 2002), 66–122 (pt. 2, "The Practical Ethics of the Ascetic Branches of Protestantism," chap. 4, "The Religious Foundations of Worldly Asceticism," and chap. 5, "Asceticism and the Spirit of Capitalism").

*wanted* to be men of the calling—we, on the other hand, *must be*. For when asceticism moved out of the monastic cells and into working life, and began to dominate inner worldly morality, it helped to build that mighty cosmos of the modern economic order (which is bound to the technical and economic conditions of mechanical and machine production). Today this mighty cosmos determines, with overwhelming coercion, the style of life *not only* of those directly involved in business but of every individual who is born into this mechanism, and may well continue to do so until the day that the last ton of fossil fuel has been consumed.<sup>40</sup>

If Bartholomew and Francis are innocent as doves in calling for a new simplicity of life based on a lifestyle that is contemplative and purposefully simple, then they could also be read as being shrewd as serpents. They know, with Weber, that in modern capitalism “asceticism moved out of the monastic cells and into working life.” They also know that it cannot be put back into monastic cells, but the monks and those who share their theology can leave their cells and steal back the ascetic ethos that was plagiarized and perverted by Puritans and their capitalist descendants. In Weber’s thinking the perversion worked like this: the Puritans taught an anti-ascetic new asceticism that disdained religious “works righteousness” to earn points with God but that favored a highly disciplined way of life to fulfill one’s worldly calling. Further, there was a disconnection between spiritual discipline (which was considered bad because it constituted “works righteousness”) and secular disciplines (which were perceived as good when they were seen as living out one’s providential calling), but not a total break because both were in the matrix of Christian Scripture and theology. But the post-Puritan capitalists made a total break and leave the Christian matrix behind. They make use of the Puritan idea of a secular ascetic discipline but within a new matrix with a new Promethean religious sensibility. The capitalists, too, reject Christian “works righteousness” as the Puritans understood it (i.e., earning points with God to have access to heaven after death), but they are not able to maintain the same distinction between sacred and secular as the Puritans. Instead they created a new sacred based on a quasi-pagan Promethean vision of human life. In the new sacred worldview of the capitalists, the new Promethean antitheology theology of human power, works righteousness returns in a new mode: the goal is not to earn points with God in heaven to avoid an afterlife in hell, but rather money and power in this earthly life. In the new capitalist religious asceticism, wealth, success, and financial domination are the signs of secular salvation from meaninglessness.

<sup>40</sup> Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 120–21, emphasis in the original.

It is likely that Bartholomew is fully aware of Weber's thesis, embraces its general outlines, and is endeavoring to reverse the process Weber describes; he is challenging the transformative hostile takeover of Christian asceticism by Puritans and their capitalist descendants. Bartholomew refers to Weber's book in *On Earth as in Heaven*, and *Cosmic Grace, Humble Prayer*, and in both cases his point is that there are ideologies "at the foundations of contemporary European understandings of work and economics" that have, he maintains, "circumvented theology in their attempt to find some new concept of work and economy.... *Behind the modern impasse of European life hides a theological position.*"<sup>41</sup> Bartholomew then immediately turns to the subject of "the ecological crisis" and contends that "it demands a different interpretation of matter and the world, a new attitude of humankind toward nature, and a new understanding of how we acquire and make use of our material goods."<sup>42</sup> The "new attitude" and "different interpretation" he refers to could likely be an attempt to challenge the misappropriation of asceticism described by Weber. This might be why he is so direct in his call for an alternative ascetic ethos, one directly influenced by the purity of the original monastic model. The "new ethos for the Anthropocene" is in fact the old ethos of Christian monasticism recovered from its captivity by Puritan theology and reformed from the warping influence of modern capitalism.

Much of the Orthodox theological and spiritual tradition Bartholomew expresses has been formed by classical monastic practice and teachings. Like most Orthodox Christians, Bartholomew believes that there is a deep wisdom in monasticism that acts as a guide for the whole Christian community:

The Orthodox Church speaks of an ascetic ethos that is required of all people, and not only of monastics. Admittedly, asceticism carries with it the baggage of dualism and denial, developed over many centuries. Yet this is not the vision of the wholeness that Orthodox spirituality understands by the notion of asceticism. For, the ascetic discipline reminds us of the reality of human failure and of the need for cosmic repentance. What is required from us is nothing less than an honest reflection on and a radical reversal of our attitude and practice. There is a price to pay for our wasting the earth's resources. This is what is meant by the cost of self-discipline. In Christian terms, it is the sacrifice of bearing the cross. The environmental crisis will not be solved by sentimental expressions of regret or political slogans of change. The solution to our ecological impasses

<sup>41</sup> Patriarch Bartholomew, *Cosmic Grace, Humble Prayer*, 107; *On Earth as in Heaven*, 290; emphasis in the original.

<sup>42</sup> Patriarch Bartholomew, *Cosmic Grace, Humble Prayer*, 108.

lies in the denial of selfishness or self-centeredness. In this regard, the spirit of asceticism leads to a sense of gratitude and the rediscovery of beauty.<sup>43</sup>

The key point is that the original ascetic ethos was not about “dualism and denial” but rather “a sense of gratitude and the rediscovery of beauty.” The theme of “gratitude” is present in many places in Bartholomew’s writings on the environment. This theme is based on his interpretation of the sacrament of Eucharist, which etymologically comes from the Greek εὐχαριστία, *eukharistia*, which means “gratitude” or “thankfulness.” In Bartholomew’s theology, the words “ascetic” and “eucharistic” necessarily belong together because the ethos of the latter is dependent on the practice of the former. He then connects the theme of eucharistic gratitude with the theme of embracing the beauty of life on Earth by reflecting on the meaning of the Christian sacrament of Eucharist:

In calling for a “eucharistic spirit,” the Orthodox Church is reminding us that the created world is not simply our possession, but rather it is a gift—a gift from God the Creator, a healing gift, a gift of wonder and beauty. There, the proper response, upon receiving such a gift, is to accept and embrace it with gratitude and thanksgiving.... *A eucharistic spirit implies using the earth’s natural resources with thankfulness, offering them back to God; indeed, not only them, but also ourselves.* In the Sacrament of the Eucharist, we return to God what is His own: namely, the bread and wine, together with the entire community. All of us and all things represent the fruits of creation, which are no longer imprisoned by a fallen world, but returned as liberated, purified from their fallen state, and capable of receiving the divine presence within themselves. Whoever gives thanks also experiences the joy that comes from the appreciation of that for which he or she is thankful. Conversely, whoever does not feel the need to be thankful for the wonder and beauty of the world, but instead demonstrates only selfishness and indifference, can never experience a deeper, divine joy, but only sullen and inhumane satisfaction.<sup>44</sup>

The “deeper, divine joy” he refers to here is not the joy of being in heaven after death. It is the ability to know real love for the beauty of all creation. Bartholomew quotes Fr. Zosima from Dostoyevsky’s *Brothers Karamazov*: “Love all God’s creation, the whole of it and every grain of sand. Love every leaf and every ray of light. Love the animals, love the plants, love everything.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 360. Also in this text he writes, “Now, this voluntary ascetical life is not required only of the hermits or monastics. It is also demanded of all Orthodox Christians, according to the measure of balance” (298).

<sup>44</sup> Patriarch Bartholomew, *Cosmic Grace, Humble Prayer*, 328–29, emphasis in the original. See also his *On Earth as in Heaven*, 97, 195.

If you love everything you will perceive the divine mystery in things.”<sup>45</sup> Along these lines, Bartholomew likes to quote this line from the great Orthodox monk and saint Isaac the Syrian: “Having a heart that burns with love for the whole of creation: for humans, for birds, for beasts, even for demons—for all God’s creatures.”<sup>46</sup>

Once we are in the world of Zosima and Orthodox monastic spirituality, Bartholomew brings into the discussion another of his favorite themes: “humility,” “self-control,” and “self-restraint” as the means by which we learn to see beauty, know joy, and feel gratitude.<sup>47</sup> This is a complex topic, but generally speaking in Orthodox monastic theology our natural and good desires for necessary things like food, shelter, rest, belonging, physical affection, and respect can often become obsessions (the “deadly passions” in classical terminology). These obsessions can then so completely dominate our consciousness that we become slaves of compulsive behaviors to pursue and maintain them, and often in highly exaggerated excesses. As Bartholomew puts it, we fail to distinguish “between what we want and what we need.”<sup>48</sup> As a result of our obsessive thoughts and their concomitant compulsive behaviors our energies are all directed toward futile and frustrating quests that fill us with anxiety, a lust for power, and a host of other pernicious psycho-spiritual pathologies. The monastic practices of meditative prayer, contemplation, and *lectio divina* are intended to break the ugly cycle of obsessive-compulsive behavior and free our consciousness for attention to the beautiful gifts of God’s creation all around us and the beautiful gift of God’s dwelling within us. The aim of all classical Christian ascetic practice is to develop an increasingly reverent and open awareness of God’s sacred presence in all things, in all people, and in our own hearts. This is the root of the monastic spirituality of “hesychasm” (ἡσυχασμός, *hesychasmos*, from ἡσυχία, *hesychia*, “stillness, rest, quiet, silence”), which Bartholomew certainly knows and highly respects—he called hesychasm the “art of arts and science of sciences.”<sup>49</sup> He says this because hesychasm is

<sup>45</sup> Patriarch Bartholomew, *Cosmic Grace, Humble Prayer*, 146. Bartholomew only quotes part of this passage. The remainder of it goes like this: “And when once you perceive this, will thenceforward grow every day to a fuller understanding of it: until you come at last to love the whole world with a love that will then be all-embracing and universal.” Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Macmillan, 1922), 339.

<sup>46</sup> Patriarch Bartholomew, *On Earth as in Heaven*, 201; *Cosmic Grace, Humble Prayer*, 297.

<sup>47</sup> Patriarch Bartholomew, *Cosmic Grace, Humble Prayer*, 28, 222, 297, 329, 360; *On Earth as in Heaven*, 97, 201, 213.

<sup>48</sup> Patriarch Bartholomew, *Cosmic Grace, Humble Prayer*, 298; *On Earth as in Heaven*, 202.

<sup>49</sup> For example, see Bartholomew’s discussion of hesychasm in *Conversations with Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I*, ed. Olivier Clément and trans. Paul Meyendorff (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1997), 220. See also 23, 133, 201, 219–24.

not simply about learning to love wisdom (φιλοσοφία, *philosophia*), but also about learning to love beauty (φιλοκαλία, *philokalia*).<sup>50</sup>

Francis is deeply influenced by this strain of the Christian tradition, although his sources are not as explicit and easy to trace as Bartholomew's. Francis is a Jesuit and follower of Saint Ignatius of Loyola. Yet it is reasonable to think that Ignatius, who read about Saint Francis of Assisi during his period of conversion from 1521 to 22, considered Franciscan spirituality an important model for assimilation. It has been argued more than plausibly that there is a discernible strain of Bonaventure's theology in Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises*.<sup>51</sup> For example, the Second and Third Points of the "Contemplation to Gain Love" in the Fourth Week of the *Spiritual Exercises* contain the following:

The second, to look how God dwells in creatures, in the elements, giving them being, in the plants vegetating, in the animals feeling in them, in men giving them to understand: and so in me, giving me being, animating me, giving me sensation and making me to understand; likewise making a temple of me, being created to the likeness and image of His Divine Majesty; reflecting as much on myself.... The third, to consider how God works and labors for me in all things created on the face of the earth—that is, behaves like one who labors—as in the heavens, elements, plants, fruits, cattle, etc., giving them being, preserving them, giving them vegetation and sensation, etc.

Comparing this passage to the first four chapters of Bonaventure's *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum* would be illuminating in itself.<sup>52</sup> Thinking about the Dionysian substructure of the *Itinerarium* would bring more depth to our understanding of the meditative-contemplative mysticism in Bonaventure's version of Franciscan spirituality.<sup>53</sup>

The key point here, however, is that the Pope Francis' own environmental theology lives and moves within a matrix whose architectonic shows a clear pattern formed by the nexus of Pseudo-Dionysius, Bonaventure, and

<sup>50</sup> Indeed, this is why the Orthodox Christian collection of monastic texts on Hesychast spirituality written between the fifth and the fifteenth centuries is titled *The Philokalia*. Isaac the Syrian, one of the saints Bartholomew quotes most frequently, is cited several times in *The Philokalia*. This collection of texts was also well known to Dostoyevsky and the nineteenth-century Russian monks who inspired the character of Zosima in *Brothers Karamazov*.

<sup>51</sup> See Brian Purfield, "Traditions of Spiritual Guidance: Bonaventure and Ignatius—Kindred Spirits?," *The Way* 32 (1992): 143–50.

<sup>52</sup> *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*, ed. and trans. Philotheus Boehner and Zachary Hayes (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2003), 39–72.

<sup>53</sup> In the *Itinerarium* Bonaventure makes his debts to Dionysius explicit: see the Boehner and Hayes edition and translation, 39, 73.

Ignatius. The complex nexus of Hesychast authors in the Eastern Christian tradition is obviously not identical to the Pseudo-Dionysius–Bonaventure–Ignatius nexus, but both sets of interconnections overlap at the Dionysian node, and both live within matrices with meditative-contemplative patterns. The emphasis falls more heavily on “contemplation in action” in the writings of Bonaventure, Ignatius, and Pope Francis than it does in Eastern monasticism. Nevertheless, both Eastern and Western traditions, Hesychast or Franciscan-Ignatian, endeavor to ground active works of love in a contemplative spirituality that seeks God in the depths of creation and the depths of the self; the fruit of loving action has roots in the practice of prayerful contemplation.

When reading Pope Francis’ *Laudato Si’*, therefore, we must notice that when he extols Francis of Assisi as a man for our time he is at the same time evoking a particular world of Christian spirituality that includes but is broader than Saint Francis. We should notice too that his interpretation of Saint Francis has a Hesychast flavor, and is indeed very similar to Dostoyevsky’s Zosima and Bartholomew’s Isaac the Syrian. As Pope Francis reads him, Saint Francis of Assisi “communed with all creation, even preaching to the flowers, inviting them to praise the Lord, just as if they were endowed with reason.’ His response to the world around him was so much more than intellectual appreciation or economic calculus, for to him each and every creature was a sister united to him by bonds of affection. That is why he felt called to care for all that exists” (LS §11). And like Bartholomew, Pope Francis holds up this spiritually informed love for all creation as eminently realistic. He explains that this kind of ethos

cannot be written off as naive romanticism, for it affects the choices which determine our behavior. If we approach nature and the environment without this openness to awe and wonder, if we no longer speak the language of fraternity and beauty in our relationship with the world, our attitude will be that of masters, consumers, ruthless exploiters, unable to set limits on their immediate needs. By contrast, if we feel intimately united with all that exists, then sobriety and care will well up spontaneously. The poverty and austerity of Saint Francis were no mere veneer of asceticism, but something much more radical: a refusal to turn reality into an object simply to be used and controlled. (LS §11)

Pope Francis then explains that for Saint Francis, true spirituality means learning to read the “book of nature” and finding in it God’s “infinite beauty and goodness,” which teaches that the world is “a joyful mystery to be contemplated with gladness and praise” (LS §12). Pope Francis puts forward a very similar mystical-ecological reading of Saint John of the Cross

in his encyclical.<sup>54</sup> This makes perfect sense given the numerous connections between Dionysian mystical theology and John of the Cross' writings, and it would not be unrealistic to interpret Pope Francis as gesturing toward a salubrious weaving together of Franciscan, Carmelite, and Ignatian spiritualities in the encyclical.

The question, though, is, to what extent is Bartholomew's project to challenge capitalist misappropriations of the Christian ascetic tradition (as described by Weber) also present in Pope Francis' interpretations of Saints Francis and John of the Cross? The answer to that question could be found by examining his intertwining of various strands of the Christian contemplative tradition. However, a simpler route to the same answer could be found by looking at what Francis says about Jesus Christ himself. In his exegesis and interpretation of Matthew's Gospel, Francis explains that "Jesus lived in full harmony with creation" but was not "an ascetic set apart from the world, nor... an enemy to the pleasant things of life" (LS §98). It is important to note also that Francis asserts the following: "The poverty and austerity of Saint Francis were no mere veneer of asceticism, but something much more radical: a refusal to turn reality into an object simply to be used and controlled" (LS §11). His careful handling of the terms "ascetic" and "asceticism" suggests he understands the debased meaning each has today because of the Puritan attempt to invalidate the classical form and substitute a novel form. Yet, like Bartholomew, he is working to overturn this modern maneuver by repristinating the classical meaning. "Christian spirituality proposes an alternative understanding of the quality of life," Francis writes, "and encourages a prophetic and contemplative lifestyle, one capable of deep enjoyment free of the obsession with consumption. We need to take up an ancient lesson, found in different religious traditions and also in the Bible. It is the conviction that 'less is more'" (LS §222).

<sup>54</sup> "Saint John of the Cross taught that all the goodness present in the realities and experiences of this world 'is present in God eminently and infinitely, or more properly, in each of these sublime realities is God.' This is not because the finite things of this world are really divine, but because the mystic experiences the intimate connection between God and all beings, and thus feels that 'all things are God.' Standing awestruck before a mountain, he or she cannot separate this experience from God, and perceives that the interior awe being lived has to be entrusted to the Lord: 'Mountains have heights and they are plentiful, vast, beautiful, graceful, bright and fragrant. These mountains are what my Beloved is to me. Lonely valleys are quiet, pleasant, cool, shady and flowing with fresh water; in the variety of their groves and in the sweet song of the birds, they afford abundant recreation and delight to the senses, and in their solitude and silence, they refresh us and give rest. These valleys are what my Beloved is to me'" (LS §234).



Francis' "alternative understanding" has a double meaning because he is fighting on two fronts simultaneously. The first meaning of "alternative" contrasts the "ancient" Christian meaning of spirituality with contemporary indulgent, hedonist practices that call themselves "spirituality." The second meaning of "alternative" contrasts the "ancient" Christian meaning of spirituality as, on one hand, diligent, focused spiritual disciplines designed to cultivate a world-affirming simplicity and gratitude, with, on the other hand, the innovative post-Puritan, postreligious capitalist meaning of "ascetic" as hard work in the marketplace to cultivate world-consuming avarice and hard work in the social-political sphere to foster a missionary ethos of world-dominating financial imperialism.<sup>55</sup> Put more simply, Francis is working against the desire for spiritual freedom without religious discipline and against postreligious worldly discipline without spiritual freedom. With Bartholomew, Francis defends the classical or "ancient" ascetic model that held together both rigorous religious discipline and profound spiritual freedom in a mutually supportive symbiosis. Francis writes of this kind of asceticism as the facilitator of a particular type of sobriety that allows a liberation from obsessiveness and a kind of drunken distraction caused by insatiable longing for more and more things. The classical ascetic model liberates people by freeing them from an obsessive-compulsive pursuit of what they do not need, thereby releasing them for the pursuit of more fulfilling experiences and deeper levels of appreciation for music, art, prayer, love, service to others, and nature. "Happiness means knowing how to limit some needs which only diminish us, and being open to the many different possibilities which life can offer" (LS §223). And also like Bartholomew, Francis identifies the virtue of humility as the root and goal of classical asceticism. Humility is the "eye opening" virtue that wakes up sleepy souls and sparks lazy minds. Humility distracts the self from its distractions, one might say, and thereby fosters awareness of what Gerard Manley Hopkins calls "dearest freshness deep down things" in life.<sup>56</sup> This awareness is what Francis calls "healthy

<sup>55</sup> In the remainder of this passage Francis writes, "A constant flood of new consumer goods can baffle the heart and prevent us from cherishing each thing and each moment. To be serenely present to each reality, however small it may be, opens us to much greater horizons of understanding and personal fulfilment. Christian spirituality proposes a growth marked by moderation and the capacity to be happy with little. It is a return to that simplicity which allows us to stop and appreciate the small things, to be grateful for the opportunities which life affords us, to be spiritually detached from what we possess, and not to succumb to sadness for what we lack. This implies avoiding the dynamic of dominion and the mere accumulation of pleasures" (LS §222).

<sup>56</sup> Gerard Manley Hopkins, *God's Grandeur, and Other Poems*, edited by Thomas Crofts (New York: Dover Publishing, Inc., 1995), 15.

humility or happy sobriety” (LS §224), and it is impossible when the restless, insatiable “ego” has eclipsed God, nature, and other people in our consciousness.

Then, following the classical Hesychast protocol, Francis calls for a “serene attentiveness” and explains that “no one can cultivate a sober and satisfying life without being at peace with him or herself” (LS §§226, 225, 222). Inner peace, or interior tranquility as the Hesychasts call it, is the precondition for enjoying in wonder and awe the beauty of God in nature and the beauty of God within the self. Only those with inner peace can break away, Francis writes, from the “constant noise, interminable and nerve-wracking distractions, [and] the cult of appearances.” He continues, “Many people today sense a profound imbalance which drives them to frenetic activity and makes them feel busy, in a constant hurry which in turn leads them to ride rough-shod over everything around them. This too affects how they treat the environment. An integral ecology includes taking time to recover a serene harmony with creation, reflecting on our lifestyle and our ideals, and contemplating the Creator who lives among us and surrounds us, whose presence ‘must not be contrived but found, uncovered.’” This is the only way to overcome the “unhealthy anxiety which makes us superficial, aggressive and compulsive consumers” (LS §226). Sounding very much like Dostoyevsky’s Zosima, Francis goes on to assert, “The universe unfolds in God, who fills it completely. Hence, there is a mystical meaning to be found in a leaf, in a mountain trail, in a dewdrop, in a poor person’s face” (LS §233). This unfolding of the world and its filling by grace are made possible by an “attitude of the heart... which is capable of being fully present to someone without thinking of what comes next, which accepts each moment as a gift from God to be lived to the full” (LS §226).

Walking the classical monastic path without deviation, Francis is also walking in tandem with Bonaventure’s Neoplatonic interpretation of Saint Francis and the classical orthodox tradition. Pope Francis argues that living life to the full through the ascetic discipline of focusing on the deeper things leads one to the true knowledge of God’s beauty as it shines forth in creatures. This matches quite closely Bonaventure’s argument in *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*. Without the discipline of classical asceticism (which he interprets in a Bonaventurian key), Francis maintains, “We seem to think that we can substitute an irreplaceable and irretrievable beauty with something which we have created ourselves” (LS §34). But when we practice the ancient model of tranquility and humility our eyes are opened to the divine beauty radiating from all things, and then we see with the eyes and think with the mind of Christ who contemplated the beauty of his Father in the beauty of creation (LS §§12, 79, 97, 215, 235, 238, 241, 243,

246). Indeed, writing almost as if he were one of the authors of *The Philokalia*, Francis declares there is “a kind of salvation which occurs in beauty and in those who behold it” (LS §112). One is reminded of the famous line from Dostoyevsky’s *The Idiot*: “Beauty will save the world.” The speaker of this line, the character of Prince Myshkin, was innocent and childlike, but perhaps Bartholomew and Francis would read him as being quintessentially shrewd as well.

### Conclusion

William Faulkner wrote, “A man always falls back upon what he knows best in a crisis.”<sup>57</sup> That is true for Bartholomew and Francis. Their response to the crisis of climate change is reconstituting the classical monastic model of ascetic spiritual discipline. From their perspective, it is the most important spiritual teaching of their religious traditions, and the time has come for this force to be reawakened. They both know that the ascetic ethos has never died in our world, but has only been transformed and mutated into something serving ends completely contrary to its original design. Isaac the Syrian and the other authors collected in *The Philokalia*, Francis of Assisi, and John of the Cross might possibly be horrified into apoplexy if they could see what has become of Christian asceticism first in the hands of Puritan Protestants, and then the post-Puritan capitalists. Bartholomew and Francis are also horrified by this misappropriation, but they have gone beyond apoplexy and are making a vigorous case to the rank and file of their respective churches that they must participate in the wider, global dialogue about climate change and environmental destruction. They want the world to know that organized religion can play a constructive role in dealing with the coming crisis. Their hope is that if they can gain respect for Orthodox and Catholic Christianity as credible and sophisticated participants in efforts to save the Earth from human-made catastrophe, then perhaps they will find a wider audience for their theocentric cosmological message of finding God’s beauty in nature through simple living, repentance, and breaking free of obsessive-compulsive consumerism. The message is innocent, but putting it forward at this point in history, when an unprecedented crisis looms and threatens massive catastrophe and death, is arguably remarkably shrewd. It might be precisely the message the next generation of Earth’s inhabitants will be ready and willing to receive and put into practice. It is the message of “green apocalypse”—it is an unveiling of a way of life both

<sup>57</sup> William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (New York: Vintage International/Random House, 1990), 193.

new and ancient. It is a way centered on learning to see and participate without reserve in the ongoing process of God's incarnation in the creation, a process begun with Jesus Christ and carried forward by his followers. It is what Francis calls the "New Evangelization." But as his alliance with Bartholomew indicates, it is also the ancient evangelization of the monastic, Hesychast strand of the Christian tradition.

Yet Francis and Bartholomew know they are not the only ones in this crisis. The people and their ideologies that brought us to this point will also fall back on what they know best. They will, as Weber says, continue to push their style of life "until the day that the last ton of fossil fuel has been consumed."<sup>58</sup> Consumption without limits and Prometheanism are what they know best. And they know how to market this way of life to the masses around the globe. Yet, the intervention from Bartholomew and Francis is based on this simple question: how realistic is it to think that an individualistic, consumer-driven culture offers a credible solution to the disposable treatment of human beings and the disposable approach to our natural environment—is not this the most naïve form of thought available? The contest between classical Christian asceticism and post-Puritan capitalist asceticism is a struggle between rival forms of "realism," and it could well be the most important struggle in the twenty-first century. It is a contest between a genuinely theocentric humanism and cosmological religion and an anthropocentric ethos that subordinates God and the cosmos to a collective human megalomania and solipsism. In this sense it is a contest for the hearts and minds of people living in the Anthropocene age, in which the pernicious consequences of the anthropocentric ethos are all too obvious. The form of asceticism that best helps them live humanely and with human dignity amid all the havoc, misery, suffering, and death that is in store for them will be the one that triumphs. Bartholomew and Francis are working with holy zeal to persuade the world that their form of theocentric asceticism is the most humane and realistic, and that it is the one that most deserves a future.

<sup>58</sup> Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 121.