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FOREWORD

Bill McKibben

This remarkable volume helps answer a worldly question that's interested me for some years: Why has Bartholomew, the Ecumenical Patriarch and spiritual leader of Orthodox Christians worldwide, been such a standout figure among religious leaders in his call for environmental care? A Western Christian such as myself can establish an ethic of stewardship from the Catholic or Protestant readings of the Bible, but it must be said that most of these churches have been slow at best to embrace the move toward care of creation. Bartholomew, by contrast, was dubbed the "Green Patriarch" in the very first years of his patriarchate and anointed by *Time* as one of the world's hundred most important people precisely for his role in "defining environmentalism as a spiritual responsibility." When we formed 350.org, the first big grassroots climate change campaign, he was uniquely forthright in declaring that "global warming is a sin."

Ignorant of Orthodox theology, I concluded that it must have been some personal tic, perhaps the way a movie star adopts a cause. But as I've listened over the years, journeyed to the island of Halki for an ecological summit, and especially as I've read this volume, I've gotten a clearer sense that his forthright activism is simply an expression of an underlying spiritual tradition with deep connections to the natural world and remarkable gifts to offer to the rest of the world. The notion that the Logos can be seen in every created thing—that the world is in some sense a living museum of divine intent—is scandalously powerful. It undercuts the most alien idea of the Western tradition, of God (and man in his image) apart from the natural world. At war with the natural world, to judge from the results.

But that Orthodox sense of the natural world seems at odds not just with Cartesian secular modernity—it's also at odds with too much of the rest of the church, which has tended to tremble at embracing God's creation for fear it would somehow turn pagan. In fact, scholars have routinely condemned Christianity for its role in aiding and abetting the secular drive to treat the earth as nothing more than a mine to be plundered, a prosaic resource to be used up while we impatiently inhabit this waystation on the road to a better eternal home. If instead the natural world is a gift from God, the possibilities enlarge.

For one thing, it becomes possible to see in the beauty of the world around us a reminder of our need to be recalled to our relationship with the divine. A mountain, not surprisingly, is more effective than an office building in making that connection (from Sinai on, and probably long before). A lake more than a bathtub. In the natural world we are reminded, among other things, that we are small, which is one of God's great gifts to us—but one of the easiest to forget in a world where most surfaces mirror our human might. We can't know God directly, these essays suggest, but we can encounter Him, and perhaps most easily in the larger world around us, with its 24/7 testimony.

"Seeing nature as a divinely written icon, it is possible to praise the Creator and give thanks to Him for this beautiful creation, as the Psalms everywhere enjoin us," the editors write in their Introduction. So: starry night, rosy dawn, deep forest, broad beach, rolling wave, towering cloud. All worth *seeing*, seeing with the soul.

I believe this volume will offer remarkable insight for those of us from allied traditions—it is a generous gift, a pair of corrective lenses through which to view scripture and practice that we've been squinting to try to make sense of. The world, with its rising temperatures, melting ice, acidifying oceans, and ever-more-arid plains, no longer seems something to ignore. Instead it seems something to love, a part of the whole. I am reminded of God's sarcastic taunts in his great speech from the whirlwind at the close of the book of Job, the longest divine soliloquy in either testament, that account of laying the cornerstone of creation when "the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy." That exuberance is in this book, that joy is in this tradition; may we learn, and soon, how to share in it.

What is knowledge? The experience of eternal life.
And what is eternal life? The experience of all things in God.
For love comes from meeting God. Knowledge united to God fulfills every
desire. And for the heart that receives it, it is altogether sweetness over-
flowing onto the earth. Indeed, there is nothing like the sweetness of God.
—*St. Isaac the Syrian*

