

Toward a Global Ethic in Orthodoxy

Interreligious Engagement Beyond Dialogue

Prof. Andrew M. Sharp

Abstract:

This article considers whether there is a basis for a Global Ethic in Orthodoxy analogous to the “Declaration Toward a Global Ethic” of the Parliament of World Religions (1993, revised 2018). It sketches out some of the compelling questions that animate an Orthodox approach to “ethical” issues having a global impact. It engages secular approaches to global ethics and the sociological concept of “glocalization,” which has been used to show the interconnectedness of both the global and local levels of influence on human action. It interrogates neopatristic theology, as well as the recent challenges to it among Orthodox theologians, and suggests there is a need for a new paradigm in Orthodox thought and practice in order to address today’s global ethical challenges. It argues that Orthodox leaders at all levels of influence (be it international, regional, national, or local) can most effectively respond to global issues by engaging in dialogue with those of other religious traditions and working together with them toward practical solutions. In an age when people across the globe question the effectiveness of governments and the United Nations, this article considers the role that religion can play in helping to meet today’s most vexing global challenges.

We live in an age of consequential and perplexing global challenges. The climate crisis, poverty and economic inequality, exploitation from emerging information and communication technologies, forced emigration and displacement of populations, harmful dual-use bioengineering, human trafficking, the buying and selling of body parts, population growth, the rise of authoritarian governments and anti-liberal fundamentalist movements, the spread of high-consequence pathogens and lethal infectious disease, terrorism, and increased access to weapons of mass

destruction are just some of the global challenges we face in the early part of the twenty-first century.¹ Many of these, if left unchecked, could lead to doomsday scenarios for large swathes of the planet and it is uncertain how recovery would be possible given the present fragility of geopolitical and international relations.

At the same time, recent research has shown that people across the globe are less confident in the ability of their governments (or even in a broader, conceptualized ideal such as “democracy”²) to address the economic, human rights, and security challenges that are tearing many societies apart.³ In this age of skepticism and despair, some have begun to reexamine the role that religion can play in helping to meet some of the most vexing global challenges.⁴ This was, in fact, the intent of the Parliament of World Religions, when it produced a “Declaration Toward a Global Ethic” at its gathering in Chicago in 1993.⁵ It was the first statement of its kind in the modern era and it universally condemned things like pollution, prejudice, violence, and warfare. It was drafted primarily by Professor Hans Küng, in consultation with several hundred scholars and religious leaders, and was an attempt to identify the shared ethical commitments of the world’s religious, spiritual, and cultural traditions. The statement asserted there was, in fact, already a, “consensus among the religions which can be the basis for a global ethic—a minimal *fundamental consensus* concerning binding *values*, irrevocable *standards*, and *fundamental moral attitudes*.”⁶ It did not claim to provide a solution to specific global problems, but rather a vision for peaceful coexistence and a change of consciousness of individuals and communities that would be mutually beneficial for the entire human family and the planet. The Parliament added a fifth directive

¹ In this article I will use the word “globalization” in a neutral way, as a descriptive term for the broad changes that have taken place in society over the past few hundred years. The term itself is problematic because it can signify different things to different people and may, in fact, be viewed in positive and/or negative ways depending on one’s experiences, culture, values, etc.

² Richard Wike, Laura Silver, and Alexandra Castillo, *Many Across the Globe are Dissatisfied with how Democracy is Working* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2019). Accessed at <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2019/04/29/many-across-the-globe-are-dissatisfied-with-how-democracy-is-working> on November 1, 2019.

³ “Many Around the World Losing Faith in Democracy,” U.S. News and World Report, April 30, 2019. Accessed at <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/articles/2019-04-30/many-around-the-world-losing-faith-in-democracy> on November 1, 2019.

⁴ Brian Grim, *The Role of Faith in Systemic Global Challenges* (Geneva: World Economic Forum, 2016). Accessed at on November 8, 2019.

⁵ Hans Küng, preparer, “Declaration Toward a Global Ethic,” Parliament of the World’s Religions, September 4, 1993. Accessed at https://parliamentofreligions.org/pwr_resources/_includes/FCKcontent/File/TowardsAGlobalEthic.pdf on November 8, 2019.

⁶ Ibid.

to the “Global Ethic” in November 2018, as members committed to, “a culture of sustainability and care for the Earth.”⁷

Even though an Orthodox contingent had planned to attend the historic gathering of the Parliament of the World’s Religions in 1993—its members having played a key role in the previous meeting 100 years earlier⁸—they cancelled at the last minute, stating they could not “establish a perceived relationship with groups which profess no belief in God or a supreme being.”⁹ It was a missed opportunity for the voice of Orthodox Christianity to be heard and the Church to be seen as an institution engaged in working toward solutions to some of the most challenging social, environmental, and spiritual issues at the turn of the century. This event is, perhaps, emblematic of the kind of reputation Orthodox Christianity had engendered in the public sphere in recent decades. On the one hand, there are figures such as Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew who has garnered the respect of many on the world stage for his global leadership in efforts to address the climate crisis.¹⁰ On the other hand, there is the example of how, instead of the Orthodox Church hierarchy providing leadership to help cool tensions over the conflict in east Ukraine, the world witnessed a prolonged Moscow-Constantinople schism that has been compared to the Great Schism of 1054¹¹ and stalled ecumenical dialogue between the Orthodox Church and other Christian communions.¹²

Numerous Orthodox authors speak of the prophetic role of Orthodoxy in the world today, arguing that its history, theology, and practice have much to offer

⁷ Paul Chaffee, “Commitment to a Culture of Sustainability and Care for the Earth: A Fifth Directive Added to the Global Ethic,” *The Interfaith Observer*, January 15, 2019. Accessed at <http://www.theinterfaithobserver.org/journal-articles/2019/1/12/a-fifth-directive-added-to-the-global-ethic> on November 13, 2019.

⁸ The Most Rev. Dionysios Latas, Archbishop of the Greek Orthodox Church, was one of the major speakers at the 1893 inaugural meeting of the Parliament, also in Chicago. For a summary of events and list of key speakers, see <https://parliamentofreligions.org/parliament/new-chicago-1893/new-chicago-1893#253> (Accessed on November 8, 2019).

⁹ Michael Hirsley, “Jewish Groups Cite Farrakhan in Exit from Religion Parliament,” *The Chicago Tribune*, September 3, 1993. Accessed at <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1993-09-03-9309030257-story.html> on October 31, 2019.

¹⁰ Elizabeth Theokritoff, “Green Patriarch, Green Patristics: Reclaiming the Deep Ecology of Christian Tradition,” *Religions* 2017, 8(7), 116; <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel8070116>.

¹¹ Matthew Bell, “Orthodox Christianity faced with a political divide,” *The World*, October 19, 2018. Accessed at <https://www.pri.org/stories/2018-10-19/orthodox-christianity-faced-political-divide> on November 11, 2019.

¹² Robert Duncan, “New Orthodox schism stalls ecumenical dialogue, Vatican official says,” *Catholic New Service*, May 13, 2019. Accessed at <https://cruxnow.com/vatican/2019/05/13/new-orthodox-schism-stalls-ecumenical-dialogue-vatican-official-says> on November 11, 2019.

to efforts to address the most challenging global ethical crises of our age. For example, commenting on the question of “Globalization and Religious Experience,” Archbishop Anastasios of Albania states, “The Church should take an unremittingly prophetic and critical stand against every form of callousness toward human misery [...] by constantly participating in efforts to achieve justice and peace, by leading a simple, ascetic, and self-restrained existence.”¹³ The Archbishop speaks with authority as he, perhaps matched by few other hierarchs of our age in this regard, has lived out the stated mission through his programs and personal example in Albania and, previously, in his missionary service in Africa. At the same time, Andrew Walker points out the pressing need for a “self-critical Orthodoxy,” in relation to its prophetic role in the world today. He states that, “self-important and self-serving prophesy is prophecy without cost, without pain, without repentance. For to point the finger outside—at the West, at the heterodox—prevents us from having to look inside ourselves.”¹⁴ In light of the inability of Orthodoxy to present a united witness to the world on any number of occasions in recent decades, Walker’s admonition provides a helpful corrective.

Perhaps what is needed is a kind of “Global Ethic of Orthodoxy.” If Orthodox thinkers and leaders (both ordained and lay) can have a better sense who they are and where they stand collectively in the face of the key challenges of this age, they will more likely be able to join the world community in facing those most difficult issues that can only be addressed through a truly global response. This task is not easily achieved in isolation, however. Indeed, if Orthodoxy has something essential (a “prophetic role”) that the world needs, arguably its own theology and practice indicate this can *only* be discovered and offered by Orthodox Christians through encounter with other religious traditions.

What have Orthodox thinkers and leaders suggested to this point that could help to establish a position on “Orthodox ethics” and what might be the key components, or at least questions to consider, toward a “Global Ethic” of Orthodoxy? Before answering these questions, it is important to acknowledge two critiques of the concept of a “global ethic,” that have emerged from the social sciences over the past few decades. The sentiments underlying them reflect attitudes that are commonly held by many people today, especially in secular, primarily Western (or “Westernized/modernized”) nations.

The first line of thinking has been articulated quite well by Heather Widdows, a

¹³ Archbishop Anastasios (Yannoulatos), *Facing the World: Orthodox Christian Essays on Global Concerns* (Geneva, wcc Publications, 2003), 197.

¹⁴ Andrew Walker, “The Prophetic Role of Orthodox in Contemporary Culture,” in *Living Orthodoxy in the Modern World*, Andrew Walker and Costa Carras, eds. (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 2000), 232.

professor of Philosophy at the University of Birmingham. She directly challenges the thesis of Hans Küng and the Parliament of World Religions at the heart of the “Declaration Toward a Global Ethic.” She argues it “fails to consider those who are non-religious,” cannot affirm that “all religions support the equality of men and women,” and does not meet all the “criteria of global ethics.”¹⁵ Widdows argues that global ethics “is not advocating a particular way of life with a single set of rules, nor is it the promotion of a single principle, set of principles or set of values [... nor] a solution that people can accept and sign up to.”¹⁶ She proposes more of a secular model where what matters is how “issues are approached and the methodological, ethical framework and assumptions adopted.” Widdows, therefore, advocates for a “global-ethics approach” made up of three characteristics, namely that, “(i) its frame is global; (ii) it is multidisciplinary; [and] (iii) it combines theory and practice.” She points out that the advantage of this over Hans Küng's four “irrevocable directives” is that it allow for a much larger “range of positions and commitments.”¹⁷

A second critique of a “global ethic” is, in fact, a challenge to the concept of “globalization” itself. Sociologist Roland Robertson first introduced the concept of “glocalization” in 1992 as a way of questioning some of the assumptions and values implicit in the term “globalization.” He argued for a perspective that showed the interconnectedness between global developments and the dynamism of local culture. His insight from a sociological perspective was that in this postmodern age there are two tendencies or forces at play, one that is globalizing and another that is localizing. His term “glocal” was an attempt to bring the two together.¹⁸ In subsequent years, the efficacy and application of the theoretical constructs of “glocalization” and “globalization” (either as interrelated or independent processes) have been debated by social scientists.¹⁹ These discussions have examined important questions about the degree to which global forces and events have an impact on

¹⁵ *Global Ethics: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2011), 5–6. Another similar approach, though more aggressively antagonistic toward religion, can be found in Rodrigue Tremblay, *Le Code pour une éthique globale: Vers une civilisation humaniste* (Montreal: Liber, 2009).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁸ Roland Robertson, *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture* (London: Sage, 1992), 173 and more fully developed in his often-cited article, “Glocalization: Time-Space and Homogeneity-Heterogeneity,” in *Global Modernities*, eds. Mike Featherstone, Scott Lash, and Roland Robertson (London: Sage, 1995), 25–54.

¹⁹ For an overview, see Habibul Khondker, “Glocalization,” *The Oxford Handbook of Global Studies*, eds. M. Juergensmeyer, S. Sassen, M. Steger, and V. Faessel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190630577.013.4.

local cultures and realities. They have raised important questions about agency, cultural homogenization, and interpersonal relations, pointing out that “local” dynamics have and continue to be more significant than has been previously acknowledged.

From the perspective of key Orthodox thinkers, proposals supporting a “global ethic” on the basis of a non-religious/secular ethic alone (as expressed by Heather Widdows), would not be acceptable. For example, Petros Vassiliadis has pointed out that in this post-modern age the Church is incompatible with secularism, individualism, and privatization, three of the “cornerstones of modernism.” He says that if the Church becomes “yet another institution of this world [...] she will lose her prophetic and above all her eschatological character.”²⁰ In other words, the Church (and one could expand this to include other religious voices as well) has an important role to play in addressing the troubling societal challenges of our global age.

Another reason a purely non-religious/secular ethic alone is inadequate is because, as Vigen Guroian puts it, “secularism is [in fact] a ‘stepchild’ of Christianity.” He says that even though it may “imitate the Christian virtues” and, therefore, purport to offer ethical principles, it strips these virtues, “from the ascetical and spiritual disciplines that remind those who exercise them of their complete dependence on God and need to repent that they may become holy.”²¹ Guroian asserts that the “progressivisms” in our secular age (through “education, economics, social science, diversity, multiculturalism, feminism, and deconstructionism”)—though well-meaning and historically inspired by Christianity—ultimately fall short because they are based on the belief that “the perfect or best of all possible worlds is a strictly human and historical project.”²² In other words, it is essential for Christian leaders and scholars to be involved in any global ethic because it is their responsibility to remind society that any purely “human solutions”—without any consideration of natural law, God’s providence, and the inherent wisdom contained in scripture and holy tradition—will never fully address the problems we face in our day.

In terms of the second critique of a global ethic and the possible insights from the scholarly debate associated with the notion of “glocalization,” the work of sociologist Victor Roudometof is particularly helpful. Roudometof has shown that, unlike the common notion that the universalizing concepts of globalization (with

²⁰ “The Universal Claims of Orthodoxy and the Particularity of Its Witness in a Pluralistic World,” in *The Orthodox Churches in a Pluralistic World: An Ecumenical Conversation*, E. Clapsis, ed. (Geneva: WCC Press, 2004), 196.

²¹ Vigen Guroian, *The Orthodox Reality: Culture, Theology, and Ethics in the Modern World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 59.

²² *Ibid.*, 18.

underlying values of modernity, secularization, human rights, political liberalism, etc.) have brought people closer together across the globe, they have actually produced more ethnic conflict, polarization, identity politics, and culture wars.²³ This is reminiscent of a point that Tarek Mitri made a couple of decades ago in relation to the conflicts of the time in the Middle East and the impact of global and local forces in shaping Orthodox thinking, as well as that of other religious traditions:

Ancestral hatred is, more often than not, fabricated rather than inherited. It is in many ways a creation of modernity, and much less an expression of a continued history [...]. Hatred is inculcated as much, or even more, by a modern discourse than by memory. It is [more] often stirred up by radio broadcasts, articles in the press and television programmes than inherited from parents. If the past does not meet the needs of the present, another one can always be invented.²⁴

Mitri was making the point that globalization—combined with the religious and nationalist aspirations of local communities that have been shaped by the modern, secular view of the world – has not only created new divisions among human beings, but also introduced modern prejudices into our memories of past ages. The antagonism of modern culture toward religion, based on a particular interpretation of the “clash of religions” today, was simply not the norm in ages past. More recently, Roudometof completed a broader study of Orthodox Christian societies, which led him to the conclusion that “both nation-state formation and transnationalism should be viewed as having a decisive impact on the future trajectories of Orthodox Christianity.” He suggests that globalization, instead of modernization, should be used as a lens to understand the “religion-glocal nexus” of Orthodox thought and practice. He adds that there is a “heuristic value in using the concept of glocalization” to shed light on the “historical entanglements between universalism and particularism,” allowing for a much fuller expression of the faith within “concrete eras, cultural milieus, and institutional contexts.”²⁵

This insight is very important because it could help explain the extent to which the identity of Orthodox Christians, and even Orthodox theology, has been tainted by the philosophical presumptions of modernity and, again in the words of Rou-

²³ See, for example, how Roudometof uses various national revolutions in the Balkans as case studies to demonstrate this trend in his *Nationalism, Globalization, and Orthodoxy: The Social Origins of Ethnic Conflict in the Balkans* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001).

²⁴ Tarek Mitri, “Religious Plurality in the Context of Globalization: Introductory Reflections,” *Current Dialogues*, July 1999. Accessed at <http://wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/inter-religious/cd33-09.html> on January 8, 2020.

²⁵ Victor Roudometof, *Globalization and Orthodox Christianity: The Transformations of a Religious Tradition* (Oxford: Routledge, 2014), 172.

dometof, “modernization theories.” It may also have much to do with why Orthodox Christians have had a mixed record on engaging in global concerns, but this, as well as a possible solution, will be discussed a bit later. First, the question of how Orthodox thought, and especially Orthodox ethics, has been stuck by “modernization” needs to be further explained.

Andrew Louth has pointed out that a truly watershed moment in the history of Orthodoxy in the modern age was the publication of the *Philokalia* in 1782. He argues it was a turning point in Orthodox thought and experience and the reverberations continue to the present day. Louth says the *Philokalia*,

[S]uggested a way of approaching theology that had as its heart an experience of God [...] an approach that shuns any idea of turning God into a concept, a philosophical hypothesis, or some sort of ultimate moral guarantor [...]. [I]t sought to return the living of the Christian life [...] to its roots in the Fathers [...] rooted in the experience of prayer, and all that that entails by way of ascetic struggle and deepening insight—nourished by the Fathers (and Mothers) of the Church.²⁶

One could think of this as a kind of rebirth of Orthodox theology and coming into its own, after centuries of being entangled in the developments of Christianity in the West and the disputes between Catholic and Protestant thought. The distinctive features of this theology included insights from monastic experience—including the importance of the *Jesus Prayer* and a way of doing theology that involved an actual experience of God that had as its goal deification (or *theosis*)—engagement with the writings and teachings from Greek Patristic literature, and a new appreciation of the artistic and spiritual sensibilities of the Byzantine age.

This same period that witnessed the rebirth of Orthodox theology was also the era of the nascent modern independence movements of the West, sometimes called the age of democratic revolutions.²⁷ It was the culmination of what historian Marshall Hodgson called “the Great Western Transmutation,” which could arguably mark the beginning of the modern global age. According to Hodgson, these newly formed nation-states were the result of “a kindred spirit [that] established likewise unprecedented norms in human social relations [...having] far-reaching effects not only among Europeans but also in the world at large.” He also makes the point that

²⁶ Andrew Louth, *Modern Orthodox Thinkers: From the Philokalia to the Present* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), xiii.

²⁷ See R.R. Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution: A Political History of Europe and America, 1760–1800* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014). The democratic revolutions included the American Revolution from 1765–1783, the French Revolution from 1789–1799, the Haitian Revolution from 1791–1804, and the revolutions and uprisings of 1830 and 1848 involving France, Belgium, Portugal, Poland, Switzerland, Italy, Hungary, and Germany.

this same generation also saw the Industrial Revolution and “a third and almost equally unprecedented event: the establishment of European world hegemony.”²⁸ Though later generations of Orthodox leaders and theologians would think more critically about the philosophical foundations of modernity,²⁹ which were being exported in all directions across the globe, this was an age of idealistic expectations in Orthodox lands. Intoxicated by the dream of political liberalism and the promise of cultural validation from the nationalist cause, Orthodox peoples across the Ottoman Empire began their national revolutions. They did so on the basis of common language and culture, abandoning the paradigm that had been in place for centuries with the Millet System, which itself was modeled along the lines of Byzantine notions of political organization. The first of these was the Serbian Revolution from 1804–1817, then the Greek Revolution started in 1821, followed by Bulgaria and Romania later in the nineteenth century.

The most dramatic transformation of Orthodox theology, however, did not take place until the twentieth century through events that transpired outside traditional Orthodox lands. The greatest theological revolutions, which were the end result of the publication of the *Philokalia* at the end of the eighteenth century, took place within and through diaspora communities that established themselves in Western nations, especially in Paris. Paul Gavrilyuk has argued that modern Orthodox theology owes much to the encounters of Orthodox Christians with Western culture and ideas following two great migrations, which he colorfully refers to as the “philosophy steamer” and the “theology steamer.” The term “steamer” refers to the boats upon which key Orthodox philosophers and theologians emigrated at two key points in the twentieth century, first to Europe and then to North America.³⁰

²⁸ Hodgson, Marshall G. S. “The Great Western Transmutation.” in *Rethinking World History: Essays on Europe, Islam and World History*, Edmund Burke, ed. Studies in Comparative World History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 44–71. doi: 10.1017/CBO9780511626104.006.

²⁹ Paschalis Kitromilides notes that as the Enlightenment confronted the leaders of the newly forming nation-states, with their national churches, they, “set the ecumenicity of Christian ideals against the parochialism of nationalism.” See his article, “The Legacy of the French Revolution: Orthodoxy and Nationalism,” in *The Cambridge History of Christianity, Vol. 5: Eastern Christianity*, Michael Angold, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 229–249 (229).

³⁰ Paul Gavrilyuk, “Teaching Orthodox Theology in the Context of Christian Diversity,” in *Orthodox Handbook on Ecumenism: Resources for Theological Education*, P. Kalaitzidis et al., eds. (Oxford: Regnum Books Intl., 2014), 884–888. Though Gavrilyuk does also mention the significance of theologians (like John Zizioulas, John Romanides, Christos Yannaras, Alexei Losev, Sergei Averintsev, and Dumitru Staniloae) who “exercised theological leadership in the historically Orthodox countries,” his argument is that Orthodox theology (as it developed in the 20th century) “remained largely a phenomenon of the diaspora.”

The “philosophy steamer” represents the Russian Religious Renaissance that emerged from a group of Russian emigres who fled to Paris after the Bolshevik revolution and established St. Sergius Orthodox Theological Institute there in 1925. They took on a particular intellectual form that Gavrilyuk characterizes this way:

The Russian Religious Renaissance was an attempt to interpret all aspects of human existence—culture, politics, even economics—in Christian terms, brought about by the generation of Nicholas Berdyaev, Sergius Bulgakov, Nicholas Lossky, and Lev Shestov. This older generation built upon the main currents of nineteenth-century western European and Russian religious thought.³¹

He gives examples of how each of these figures was significantly influenced by and/or reacting to the thought of Western intellectuals such as Jacob Boehme, F.W.J. von Schelling, and Søren Kierkegaard. This first wave of thinkers tended to think in very broad, universal terms, which the younger generation criticized as being too accepting of modern philosophical ideals. Wanting to free Orthodoxy theology from its centuries of “Western Captivity,” figures such as Georges Florovsky, Vladimir Lossky (Nicholas Lossky’s son), Basil Krivocheine, and Myrrha Lot-Borodine developed a new model for Orthodox theology that was based on the principles from the patristic age applied to modern realities (the “neopatristic synthesis” or, more commonly, “neopatristic theology.”) Phase two of this revolution in Orthodox theology came after a second group of Christian intellectuals from St. Sergius emigrated to the United States after World War II (the “theological steamer.”)³² The most important developments in Orthodox thought in the second half of the twentieth century were cultivated in this new school of neopatristic theology, which was largely responsible for an ecclesiological and liturgical revival in the Orthodox Church and the significant contribution of Orthodox theology to the modern ecumenical movement. Figures such as Serge Verhovskoy, Alexander Schmemman, and John Meyendorff made important scholarly contributions, especially in the fields of moral and comparative theology, liturgical theology, and Church History and Patristics (particularly neo-Palamism) respectively.

It would be hard to overstate the importance of neopatristic theology in the Orthodox Church over the past several decades. For all its benefits and positive contributions to the thinking and practices of Orthodox and other Christians, there has been a downside to the great success of neopatristic theology. This has become a relatively hot topic recently, and fairly contentious within some circles, among contemporary Orthodox and other Christian scholars with an appreciation

³¹ Ibid., 884.

³² Ibid., 886.

of Orthodox theology. Paul Ladouceur has outlined the contours and significance of these conversations quite well in his recent and exhaustive introduction to modern Orthodoxy theology.³³ He points out that the most strident challenges to the legacy of neopatristic theology in recent years have been in the area of social and political theology.³⁴ With so many pressing challenges and developments over the past few decades (he mentions the fall of communism, religiously motivated politics in the West, the rise of conservative nationalism, global migration, etc.), Ladouceur suggests that it should be no surprise that Orthodox theologians have focused their attention on these domains. He further explains why neopatristic theology has been an easy target:

[Whereas a] Christian perspective on social and political issues was one of the major themes of the Russian religious renaissance [...] in Vladimir Soloviev and his successors, especially Nicolas Berdyaev and Sergius Bulgakov [...], [the] younger generation of theologians, led by Georges Florovsky and Vladimir Lossky, had a different agenda [...]. Fundamental theological issues such as apophaticism, divine energies, theosis, ecclesiology, pneumatology (the *filioque*) and anthropology dominated the neopatristic theological agenda, leaving little room for social and political issues.³⁵

In other words, so many of the important Orthodox theologians of the second half of the twentieth century, many of whom had emigrated to the West, had to prioritize a deep rediscovery and articulation of their Orthodox faith to a Western world in which the Orthodox Church seemed a relic of the past or even unknown altogether. For this reason, they simply did not emphasize social or political theology, nor were they all that engaged in public activism during some tumultuous periods in the countries in which they had formed their new Orthodox communities. It is important to note as well that even though neopatristic theology flourished in the “diaspora”—giving new life and credibility to many Orthodox faithful who had established deep roots in North American and Western Europe—it was highly influential among a number of notable Orthodox theologians and thinkers who remained active in Orthodox-majority nations. Some examples would be Dumitru Staniloae, John Zizioulas, John Romanides, Christos Yannaras, and Stelios Ramfos, to name a few.

³³ Paul Ladouceur, *Modern Orthodox Theology: All Things New—Rev 21:5* (London: T & T Clark/Bloomsbury: 2019)

³⁴ He discusses Pantelis Kalatzidis, Aristotle Papanikolaou, and Athanasios Papathanasiou as examples of those who have challenged some of the ideas (or at least poor implementation) of neopatristic theology in order to make a “defence of liberal democracy, a theology of liberation and human rights,” though, in Ladouceur’s assessment their efforts have had “mixed results.” See *Modern Orthodox Theology*, 359.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 358.

Ladouceur and Gavrilyuk seem to be in agreement that the present generation of Orthodox theologians is finding the paradigm of neopatristic theology to be inadequate for addressing the challenges and concerns of the Orthodox Church in the twenty-first century. Ladouceur observes that a growing number of scholars find it to be

...out of step with rapid technological changes and the growing social, ethnic and religious complexity of modern industrial and post-industrial societies [... such that] secularization, the marginalization of religion, threats to security, growing social and economic inequalities and the erosion of civil liberties [... appear] far more important than metaphysical doctrinal questions.³⁶

The priorities have changed, perhaps because this current generation does not need to be so occupied in establishing their identity (both cultural and theological) in a foreign land. It may also be the case that Orthodox theologians are becoming more sensitized to the existential threats, not only to their own religious and ethnic communities, but also to all of humanity and, as a result of the climate crisis, the entire created order. Gavrilyuk says there has been a fundamental change in Orthodox theology in the West, which has “developed from an unknown commodity into a respectable minority theology.”³⁷ He predicts that in the years ahead,

[N]eopatristic theology will remain a leading direction of Orthodox theology. Indeed, Orthodox theology cannot become post-patristic if it is to remain Orthodox. Yet the time is ripe to explore the paradigms that engage modernity and post-modernity in a more robust and direct manner. Orthodox theology is at the crossroads, and there is a growing dissatisfaction with the hegemony of the neopatristic paradigm.³⁸

Gavrilyuk does not suggest an abandonment of some of the key teachings and accomplishments of neopatristic theology, but rather a maturing of Orthodox theology to transcend it and become more engaged in the pressing ethical issues of this age.

Though on the one hand it may be true that Orthodox theology is on the precipice of a new era, on the other hand it could be argued that too many Orthodox leaders and scholars continue to recycle old questions or simply lack the vision, or the courage, to take the bold steps that are needed “at the crossroads” of today. Like so many groups in this age of polarization, could Orthodoxy theologians run

³⁶ Ibid., 359.

³⁷ “Teaching Orthodox Theology in the Context of Christian Diversity,” 885.

³⁸ Ibid., 887.

the risk of creating and being trapped within their own echo chamber? Perhaps the greatest safeguard against this would be to listen to our friends from other Christians communions, and even other religious traditions, who can look in from the outside and provide some much-needed perspective.

It seems the organizers of the inaugural conference of the International Orthodox Theological Association (IOTA) had this in mind when they invited a number of non-Orthodox “observers” to Iasi, Romania in early 2019. One of these observers, Regina Elsner, a Catholic scholar with the Centre for East European and International Studies (ZOIS) in Berlin, made an important observation after attending the conference. She noted that IOTA had established several working groups that would address ethical questions and reported that she attended a number of their sessions. After the conference, she made the following statement:

Surprisingly, the topic of social ethics was not mentioned at any point. Does that mean there is no systematic, fundamental dealing with the theological vision of the structures of modern human society? There were various approaches to issues like human rights, ecology, economics, international relations, discrimination, violence and so on, yet there is no group and no session on social ethics. Why is this so?³⁹

There are two important insights in Elsner’s article. The first is her observation that of all the groups and sessions that touched on ethical questions, there was almost nothing in the broad area of social ethics. Having attended the conference myself, I agree with Elsner’s point and would add, as she alludes to in her article, that the ethical topics that seem to be prioritized were connected broadly to political theology (church-state relations, national identity, international relations, human rights, etc.) Since many of the topics addressed within the broad category of “social ethics” now have a global frame (reflecting our increasingly “global” societies), observers such as Elsner would likely have been hoping to see some mature discussions about a global ethic that might be guiding

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The priorities have changed. This current generation does not need to establish their identity (both cultural and theological) in a foreign land. Orthodox theologians are becoming more sensitized to the existential threats, not only to their own religious and ethnic communities, but also to all of humanity and, as a result of the climate crisis, the entire created order.

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³⁹ Regina Elsner, “Searching for Social Ethics,” *Public Orthodoxy*, April 3, 2019. accessed at <https://publicorthodoxy.org/2019/04/03/searching-for-social-ethics> on January 16, 2020.

Orthodox thinking. She might have also expected to hear reports about the activities of Orthodox leaders and scholars to proactively address some of the most pressing social challenges across the globe and across multiple nations. Sadly, she saw very little of this at the IOTA Conference.⁴⁰

It was astonishing that one area that often does touch upon social and global ethics, interreligious relations and dialogue, received very little attention at the IOTA conference, which is not so much a criticism of the conference organizers as it is an acknowledgement that it is such an underdeveloped subfield of Orthodox theology or ethics. There is, in fact, no interreligious dialogue group within IOTA, and the topic only made the conference program in the form of one “special session,” which was sparsely attended, particularly when compared with others connected to “Orthodoxy and politics.” As someone who has worked in this field for a number of years and written one of only a handful of monographs on the subject from Orthodox authors, I can attest to the fact that this topic is not currently a priority among most Orthodox theologians.⁴¹ There certainly are some high-profile Orthodox leaders who have been very engaged, often courageously so, with interfaith dialogue and partnering with those of other religions to address pressing global concerns, but this has not translated to an explosion of interest among Orthodox theologians, priests, or lay leaders.

The second important insight from Elsner’s article—when combined with the discussion above about Roudometof’s argument that globalization, instead of modernization, should be used as a lens to understand the “religion-glocal nexus” of Orthodox thought and practice—is that Orthodox scholars may still be tainted by the “philosophical presumptions of modernity.” Far too much ink has been spilled about whether one Orthodox theologian or another’s thought is too “Westernized” or “anti-Western” (by which is really meant, “Does it conform to the values of modern philosophy and support modernization?”). This entire debate, seen

⁴⁰ It should be noted that the inaugural conference of IOTA may not have been entirely representative of the engagement with social ethics by Orthodox scholars across the globe. For example, there has been a strong tradition of ethical theology at Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. Both retired and current members of the Faculty of Theology—such as Georgios Mantzaridis, Ioannis Petrou, Niki Papageorgiou, Miltiadis Vantsos, and Konstantinos Kotsiopoulos—have devoted at least some portion of their scholarship to social ethics (and even global ethics to some extent). The Faculty of Theology now has a School of Pastoral and Social Theology, which engages both theoretical and practical matters relating to church and society.

⁴¹ There are hopeful signs that this may be changing in the near future. For example, Thomas Cattoi, Brandon Gallaher, and Paul Ladouceur are in the process of putting together an edited volume (to be published by Brill) of essays exploring the encounter between Eastern Orthodoxy and non-Christian religions.

in so many areas of Orthodox theology and ethics, is an example of how Orthodox scholars are stuck within the framework of modern, often even Enlightenment, categories and priorities. Elsner points out in her article that one of the IOTA sessions was occupied with a “critique of (post)modern individualism of the so-called Western world [... versus the] “communitarian perspectives [... in] Orthodox concepts of communion and *sobornost*,” and yet did not extend at all into social ethics. She added a further example, on the issue of peace ethics, to underscore the point:

[In the Orthodox approach] peace appears to be mostly a topic of the spiritual righteousness of the individual, whether a ruler or a simple believer. Yet our globalized reality shows us that social structures and circumstances exceed personal efforts and are crucial in achieving and maintaining peace. If we want to contribute to this discourse from a theological point of view, we need an intensive interdisciplinary analysis of the theological work on these social structures. So far, it was not clear where the Orthodox contribution would come from.⁴²

In other words, there is very little evidence that Orthodox scholars are pursuing a global ethic, as their work in ethics over the past few decades has focused on the level of the individual (morality and or spirituality/*theosis*) or on the state (political liberalism/nationalism or *neo-symphonia* approaches).⁴³ There seems to be very little emphasis in between (social ethics) or transcending (global ethics) these two realms. Elsner is correct that political theology, which seems to be getting so much attention (as described above), does not adequately cover “issues of social justice, peace, solidarity, media, ecology, and economy.”⁴⁴

What would it look like to shift the primary lens of Orthodox ethical reflection from a focus on modernization to that of globalization? Could it mean a change in priorities *from* questions of human rights (as in individual self-determination), political liberalism (with a defense of democracy), religious liberties, personal freedom, and individual moral issues *to* the existential challenges facing humanity today (e.g. the climate crisis, international terrorism, poverty and extreme economic inequality, the spread of weapons of mass destruction, genocide, human traffick-

⁴² Ibid., 2–3.

⁴³ Perry Hamalis does point out in his summary of “Eastern Orthodox Ethics,” *The Encyclopedia of Ethics*, H. LaFollette (Oxford: Blackwell, 2013), 1525–1535, that one of the four characteristics of Orthodox ethics is that it “involves self-reflexivity, collaboration, and a critical engagement both with the ethics of non-Orthodox and with other academic disciplines.” However, with only some exceptions, this has not typically been an engagement with other religious traditions or across cultures in order to address some of today’s biggest challenges in social or global ethics.

⁴⁴ Elsner, 3.

ing, and others), which can only be addressed by working across differences in religion, culture, discipline, methods, geographic location, etc.⁴⁵ If not, Orthodox scholars and leaders will at best continue to be unknown and irrelevant to the broader society or worse, caught up in the modern “culture wars” that are having such a corrosive effect on civil society in many parts of the world today.

There is no shortage of examples from the past of Orthodox figures whose thinking and/or actions were more in line with this type of global ethic, which transcends the modernization approach. For example, there was Paul Evdokimov, who for many years operated an ecumenical hostel for the poor, immigrants and students and also was part of a resistance group attempting to save Jews from the Nazis.⁴⁶ There was also Elisabeth Behr-Sigel who fought for the eradication of torture (through her involvement with the organization ACAT [*Action des chretiens pour l'abolition de la torture*]) and was part of a delegation to Pope John Paul II to discuss collaboration to bring about the global eradication of the death penalty.⁴⁷ One thinks as well of figures such as Christos Yannaras or the late Phillip Sherrard who have often been misunderstood, marginalized, or neglected by mainstream Orthodox theologians who have dismissed them for being too anti-Western, but who have written extensively about some of the social and global challenges of the modern age.

Phillip Sherrard was one of the most profound of Orthodox authors to write about the relationship between God, humans, and nature and one of the earliest religious scholars to sound the alarm about the climate crisis.⁴⁸ Though some—including well-known Orthodox theologians⁴⁹—have been put off by his stinging critiques of Western science, his primary assertion that the global ecological crisis

⁴⁵ One of the documents that was produced from the 2016 Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church was *The Mission of the Orthodox Church in Today's World*. It does, in fact, briefly mention some of these challenges and suggest inter-Christian and inter-religious “co-operation for the peaceful co-existence and harmonious living together in society” and “common service together with all people of good will, who love peace that is pleasing to God, for the sake of human society on the local, national, and international levels. See section A.3–4 of *Mission of the Orthodox Church in Today's World* in the Official Documents of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church. Accessed at <https://www.holycouncil.org/-/mission-orthodox-church-todays-world> on April 30, 2020.

⁴⁶ See Michael Plekon and Alexis Vinogradov, eds., *In the World, of the Church: A Paul Evdokimov Reader* (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 2000).

⁴⁷ Louth, *Modern Orthodox Thinkers*, 271 & 275.

⁴⁸ Already in the early 1970s, Sherrard was writing about the ecological crisis, a topic that he pursued unrelentingly until his death in 1995.

⁴⁹ Even Sherrard's close personal friend and long-time colleague, Metropolitan Kalistos Ware, admitted to me once in conversation that he thought Sherrard could be too focused on the negative aspects of modern science.

is not caused by something within the environment but from a sickness that has developed in our modern thinking, is as relevant today as it was at the time of his death a quarter century ago. Sherrard also, perhaps more than most from within the Orthodox tradition, saw the value of engaging the thought of other faith traditions and was open to the wisdom that could be gained from this. Orthodox theologians of today would do well to rediscover once again Phillip Sherrard's works in order to gain the global perspective needed to sort out the complexities of today's numerous vexing challenges, including the climate crisis.

In the case of Christos Yannaras, it is fortunate that more of his works have recently been translated into English, giving a fuller picture of this thought to a much wider audience. Andrew Louth, who has done much to rehabilitate Yannaras as one of the most profound living Orthodox thinkers, has shown that his views are not so much "anti-Western" as they are occupied with solving global concerns of all. For example, Louth points out that Yannaras once said, "[My] critical stance towards the West is self-criticism; it refers to my own wholly Western mode of life. I am a Western person searching for answers to the problems tormenting Western people today."⁵⁰ One of Yannaras' more recent works translated into English makes a very important point that could be very helpful in forming an Orthodox global ethic. He argues, like Sherrard and a growing number of Orthodox writers and activists, that the ecological crisis is not about problems with the environment but in how humans think in relation to it. Yannaras' book traces the source of the general malaise in the modern world to an imbalance in the philosophical principles that underlie it, resulting from the emergence of two polarities of thought, one of which became globally dominant as the foundation of the modern world. He suggests a rediscovery of the other pole and a rebalancing of the two to help solve the global challenges of our age. He points to the ancient Greeks who believed that, "a thing was true when from defining its knowledge [...] the shared experiences of all converged—'when all share the same opinion and each bears the same witness' [... the] 'criterion of truth,' which was the *communal verification of knowledge*."⁵¹ In other words, it takes the shared experiences of many, in dialogue with each other, to address the global problems of today.

⁵⁰ Andrew Louth, "Some Recent Works by Christos Yannaras in English Translation," *Modern Theology* 25:2 April 2009, 329-340 (332), who is quoting from Yannaras' *Orthodoxy in the West*, P. Chamberas and N. Russell trans. (Brookline MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2007), viii-ix. The problems Yannaras lists as "those tormenting Western people" include, "the threat to the environment, the assimilation of politics to business models, the yawning gulf between society and the state, the pursuit of ever-greater consumption, the loneliness and weakness of social relations, the prevailing loveless sexuality."

⁵¹ Christos Yannaras, *The Schism in Philosophy: The Hellenic Perspective and its Western Reversal*, N. Russell, tr. (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2015), xii.

This article has covered a lot, though maybe has said not much, especially about a global ethic in Orthodoxy. It began with the Parliament of World Religions' "Declaration Toward a Global Ethic" from 1993 (amended with a fifth directive in 2018). What are these directives and how might they compare with the Orthodox ethical approach? They are a:

1. Commitment to a culture of non-violence and respect for life;
2. Commitment to a culture of solidarity and a just economic order;
3. Commitment to a culture of tolerance and a life of truthfulness;
4. Commitment to a culture of equal rights and partnership between men and women; and
5. Commitment to a culture of sustainability and care for the Earth.⁵²

Though there could be different interpretations and applications of these, surely on the surface there would be nothing in Orthodox theology that would pose a barrier to affirming them.

Indeed, a significant recent development in the Church seems to underscore this point. In late March 2020 the Holy Synod of the Ecumenical Patriarchate blessed for publication the result of a special commission that had been investigating since 2017 the animating questions of a social doctrine of the Orthodox Church. It produced the document, *For the Life of the World: Towards a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church*, and made it available in a dozen languages during Lent this year.⁵³ The project was unusual, for the reasons described in this essay, and in some ways unexpected. The Executive summary admits this, noting that it is "unique in that rarely are comprehensive social statements composed and presented by the Orthodox Church."⁵⁴ Indeed, not only will the topics themselves be much discussed (and likely debated) around the Orthodox world, but also the document could prove to be a lightning rod for criticism from some Orthodox leaders for the simple fact that it was the result of an initiative of the Ecumenical Patriarch, as opposed to what many had hoped would come from the entire Orthodox Church at the 2016 Holy and Great Council.⁵⁵ Again, the authors seemed

⁵² *Towards a Global Ethic: An Initial Declaration of the Parliament of the World's Religions*. Accessed at <https://parliamentofreligions.org/new-publications/towards-global-ethic-initial-declaration-fifth-directive> on January 18, 2020.

⁵³ The document accessed on the website of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America at <https://www.goarch.org/social-ethos> on June 4, 2020.

⁵⁴ *For the Life of the World*, Preface, 2.

⁵⁵ The mixed results from the 2016 Council—with the churches of Bulgaria, Antioch, Georgia, and Russia not participating—were disappointing in many respects. However, it is unlikely that the results in this particular area would have been that much different either

to anticipate this, but proceeded anyway. They described their rationale this way in the abstract:

It will be highly significant, and not without controversy, because it addresses contemporary social issues in a sustained manner that is unusual for the Orthodox Church, including poverty, racism, human rights, reproductive technology, and the environment. The purpose of the document is to offer a reference on vital issues and challenges in the world today in ways that are consistent with living as Orthodox Christians.⁵⁶

Clearly there is both a pastoral dimension here and a call to action, which must start with a change in orientation among the faithful and the leaders of the Church. The document itself does lack depth and breadth in terms of what was emphasized and what was left out. For a statement from the Orthodox Church that was released just a few weeks after the coronavirus (Covid-19) was declared a global pandemic, it is surprising that it does not mention even once the threat of outbreaks of infectious disease, which for many years has been one of the largest killers around the globe, especially in poorer nations. It also did not make the connection, as public figures such as Jane Goodall and others are pointing out, between the exploitation of the natural world (resulting in the climate crisis) and the emergence of Covid-19.⁵⁷ Another unfortunate omission in the document is that it barely mentions global violence toward girls and women, which has received much attention in the public sphere over the past few years.⁵⁸ These were certainly missed opportunities, especially in light of the fact that this statement from at least one portion of the Orthodox Church will likely be examined closely by those of other Christian denominations and different religious traditions. At the same time, it is an excellent start toward a global ethic in Orthodoxy that has the potential to start some important and fruitful conversations.

The most significant section of *For the Life of the World* is part six on “Ecumenical Relations and Relations with Other Faiths,” for the simple reason that it

way. The agenda and priorities for the Council were set well in advance and it was clear that global issues and social ethics would not be at the top of the list. The mission document from the Council, *The Mission of the Orthodox Church in Today’s World*, did touch briefly on some issues but not to the extent found in *For the Life of the World*.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 1.

⁵⁷ Fiona Harvey, “Jane Goodall: humanity is finished if it fails to adapt after Covid-19,” *The Guardian*, June 2, 2020. Accessed at <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2020/jun/03/jane-goodall-humanity-is-finished-if-it-fails-to-adapt-after-covid-19> on June 9, 2020.

⁵⁸ It does touch on the topic briefly in the sections about opposing violence and modern forms of slavery, but violence against girls and women specifically is not addressed directly at any point.

encourages Orthodox Christians to transcend the isolation, introversion, and introspection that far too often characterize local Orthodox churches. In order to find its prophetic voice in the twenty-first century and to fulfill its responsibilities in this age, the Orthodox Church must be outward facing in its perspective and global in its frame.⁵⁹ Again, the insight of Roudometof about the importance of *both* universalism *and* particularism is helpful here. An essential component of fulfilling its universal role involves engagement with those of all faiths and none, with hearts and minds open to the pain, experiences, achievements, and wisdom of all people.

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Orthodox leaders may have an easier time working on matters that concern all of humanity (and the planet) with partners of other religious traditions than coming together among themselves to hash out a global ethic for Orthodoxy.”

Part six of *For the Life of the World* frames this primarily in terms of the benefits of dialogue and says that, “the Church—illuminated by that radiance—enters into dialogue with other faiths fully prepared to be instructed by many of their own speculative, cultural, and spiritual achievements.” Having a willingness to be “instructed” through dialogue and personal encounter/friendships with those of other religions aligns well with the virtue of humility, a theme pervasive in Orthodox spirituality. Dialogue is clearly essential. However, Orthodox leaders and theologians need to be more involved in common action with those of other religions, to address the global issues faced by all people around the world, and indeed the entire created order.

Though the reasons for the withdrawal of the Orthodox contingent from the 1993 Parliament of World Religions may have made sense at the time, could it be that the Orthodox Church in is a different place today in terms of its self-understanding, its relationship to other religious traditions (as well as those who follow none and who are part of the new religious movements), and its responsibilities to the global community? Even if there are pragmatic reasons why Orthodoxy might not yet be ready to go in the direction of the Parliament of World Religions, this should not stop Orthodox Christians from working alongside those of other faith

⁵⁹ An excellent practical example of how Orthodoxy can play a prophetic role and take courageous action in the face of powerful global forces comes from the opposition of Orthodox communities to the Pebble Mine Project in Alaska. As the Rev. Michael Oleksa reports, “Only the Orthodox Church took this public stand against the mine [... because] the Orthodox, who had been invoking God’s blessing on these waters for hundreds of years could not remain silent and allow them to be poisoned.” See his article, “Fighting the Copper, Rejecting the Gold,” posted on the SALT website on November 20, 2019. Accessed at <https://saltalas.com/blog/fighting-the-copper-rejecting-the-gold> on March 10, 2020.

traditions to put the theory of a global ethic into action. By working with others in this way, we could begin to tackle the vexing global ethical challenges of the twenty-first century.

It could be argued that unless Orthodox leaders and scholars fully embrace participation with peers of other world religions—and even those representing “humanist” perspectives—to address specific global issues, it may be impossible to articulate a truly Orthodox global ethic. There seems to be evidence to support this position. In many cases when an Orthodox leader has successfully engaged a global ethical issue in recent years, it has occurred in the context of simultaneous interreligious engagement. One example would be Patriarch Bartholomew’s series of ecological symposia that began in 1995 under the auspices of the non-governmental organization Religion, Science & the Environment (RSE) and have primarily taken place on boats at sea visiting strategic ports in regions across the globe where the consequences of climate change have been very evident. The purpose of these “study voyages” has been to promote awareness to the threats to humans and the natural environment, gathering leaders and scholars of different religions, scientists, political and civic leaders, and journalists to learn about the issues and dialogue with each other in order to find practical solutions.⁶⁰ These events have generated a great deal of hope and positive responses from participants, those living in the impacted areas, and people around the world. The most recent of these water-based symposia took place in summer of 2018, after a several-year hiatus, and was covered widely by the international press.⁶¹

A second example of prolonged engagement with global issues involving Orthodox Christian leaders and those of other religions is what is called the Joint Commission for Orthodoxy-Islam Dialogue, involving representatives from the Russian Orthodox Church and religious leaders from Iran. The driver for this, which is perhaps one of the more sustained and fruitful encounters of Orthodox Christians and Muslims worldwide, has been a series of meetings that have taken place every two years, alternating locations between Moscow and Tehran. The first occurred in 1997.⁶² The most recent, the eleventh meeting of the Joint Commission for Or-

⁶⁰ See the RSE website <http://www.rsesymposia.org>, accessed January 18, 2020.

⁶¹ Derek Gatopoulos, “Climate change activists find ally in Orthodox Church leader,” *U.S. News and World Report*, June 6, 2018. Accessed at <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2018-06-06/climate-change-campaigners-find-ally-orthodox-church-leader> on January 18, 2020. Juliet Eilperin, “Climate change is a top spiritual priority for these religious leaders,” *The Washington Post*, June 26, 2018. Accessed at https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/climate-change-is-a-top-spiritual-priority-for-these-religious-leaders/2018/06/26/d5e06fd2-749e-11e8-9780-b1dd6a09b549_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.356298441d39 on January 18, 2020.

⁶² “Patriarch Alexy sends greets [sic] the participants in the 5th session of the Joint

thodoxy-Islam Dialogue, took place in May 2018 and was, like the water-symposia of Patriarch Bartholomew mentioned above, focused on the topic of religion and the environment.⁶³ According to reporting on these sessions, participants were especially focused on the “important role and responsibility of religious leaders and their followers in influencing the decision makers in such sphere (*sic*) as the relationship between man and nature.”⁶⁴ In other words, religion continues to have a key role to play and is still relevant in Iranian and Russian society.

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What is needed in this age of polarization and an uncertain future is a return to civil society, something Orthodox Christians can surely support alongside a global ethic. Through building greater religious literacy and skills in developing “appreciative knowledge”.

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There is an important lesson to learn here about the current state of Orthodoxy. In light of continued tensions between the Patriarchate of Constantinople and the Patriarchate of Russia and the inability of Orthodox primates to come together and speak with one voice on how to address many global concerns, more expedient solutions need to be considered. From a pragmatic standpoint, it seems Orthodox leaders may have an easier time working on matters that

concern all of humanity (and the planet) with partners of other religious traditions than coming together among themselves to hash out a global ethic for Orthodoxy. Certainly, our primates ought to continue attempts at unity and speaking with one voice on global problems⁶⁵ and *For the Life of the World* is a great foundation for

Theological Commission on ‘Islam-Orthodoxy’ Dialogue.” Accessed at <https://mospat.ru/archive/en/2006/02/29836/> January 31, 2021.

⁶³ The twelfth meeting of this joint commission was scheduled in Moscow for May 2020, but had to be postponed because of the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic. An Iranian news agency reported, however, that there had been an exchange of letters during that month in which the Moscow Patriarchate responded favorably to the call of Iranian leaders to establish, “a joint committee of world religious leaders to figure out how to help people across the globe amid the outbreak of the novel coronavirus.” See “Russian Orthodox Church Hails Iran’s Proposal for Religious Cooperation,” *Tasnim News Agency*, May 9, 2020. Accessed at <https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2020/05/09/2262058/russian-orthodox-church-hails-iran-s-proposal-for-religious-cooperation> on June 8, 2020.

⁶⁴ See, “11th meeting of Joint Commission for Orthodoxy-Islam dialogue takes place in Tehran,” May 10, 2018 on the website of the ROC’s Department of External Relations. Accessed at <https://mospat.ru/en/2018/05/10/news159773> on January 18, 2020.

⁶⁵ See, for example Patriarch Bartholomew’s reference in a recent speech to combined efforts among Orthodox Churches, including at the Great Council of the Orthodox Church (Crete, 2016), to address other global concerns, in addition to the climate cri-

this. At the same time, it is imperative that Orthodox Christians, both ordained and lay leaders at every level of influence (be it international, regional, national, or local), also be engaged in action with those of other religions and none that goes beyond dialogue. What is needed in this age of polarization and an uncertain future is a return to civil society, something Orthodox Christians can surely support alongside a global ethic. Through building greater religious literacy and skills in developing “appreciative knowledge” of other religions, while working together with our brothers and sisters of other religions and philosophical systems, we can, in the words of our Jewish friends, “repair the world” (*tikkun olam*) together.⁶⁶

Keywords:

global ethic, Orthodoxy, neopatristic, glocalization, interfaith dialogue

Andrew Sharp (PhD, University of Birmingham [UK]), is Associate Professor of Theology at South University, where he serves as a Program Director for the Doctor of Ministry Program. He is also Affiliate Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University, where he teaches courses on Global Ethics and World Religions. He is

the author of *Orthodox Christians and Islam in the Postmodern Age* (Brill, 2012), which was released in a Turkish language edition by Tekin Publications in 2016. His current book project is about the perspectives of key Muslim and Orthodox leaders in debates surrounding the global environmental crisis.

sis. “Ecumenical Patriarch: ‘It is unacceptable that representatives of religions appear as preachers of fanaticism,’” *The Orthodox World*, November 12, 2019. Accessed at <https://theorthodoxworld.com/ecumenical-patriarch-it-is-unacceptable-that-representatives-of-religions-appear-as-preachers-of-fanaticism> on January 18, 2020.

⁶⁶ On the notion of a widespread push for “religious literacy,” see Stephen Prothero, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—And Doesn’t* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), <https://www.harpercollins.com/9780060859527/religious-literacy>. On developing an “appreciative knowledge” of other religions, as one of the skills cultivated by an interfaith leader, see Eboo Patel, *Interfaith Leadership: A Primer* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2016), <http://www.beacon.org/Interfaith-Leadership-P1222.aspx>.