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Patriarch's book issues call to go green for God

Nicole Neroulias Religion News Service | Mar. 5, 2008

As the latest book by a religious leader calling for environmental awareness and interfaith dialogue, "Encountering the Mystery: Understanding Orthodox Christianity Today" by Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I hardly seems controversial.

But given that Bartholomew presides over a time of crisis and transition for his faith -- particularly in his own country of Turkey -- critics say Bartholomew has missed an opportunity to lead, rather than simply inspire, in the book scheduled for release on March 18. As the spiritual leader of the world's 300 million Orthodox Christians, Bartholomew, 68, is considered the first among equals in the Orthodox church and enjoys a bully pulpit that is perhaps only rivaled by the pope's in Rome.

Bartholomew uses that authority in "Encountering the Mystery" to establish a historical context for Orthodox Christian traditions, while also asserting a progressive vision on a range of social justice and environmental issues.

"We are treating our planet in an inhuman, godless manner precisely because we fail to see it as a gift inherited from above; it is our obligation to receive, respect, and in turn hand on this gift to future generations," he writes.

Nicknamed the Green Patriarch, Bartholomew has advocated for environmental protection for years, but critics complain his focus comes at the expense of tackling interfaith conflicts, notably the problems in his own backyard.

For years, Bartholomew has battled his Turkish neighbors over the rights of minority Orthodox Christians in Muslim-majority Turkey, and has chafed under government restrictions on his office, including the closing of a prominent Orthodox seminary and rules that require the Ecumenical Patriarch to be a Turkish citizen.

The disappointed reviews began with Charlotte Allen, a Catholic journalist and author of "The Human Christ: The Search for the Historical Jesus," who reviewed the book for The Wall Street Journal.

"On first reading, this exercise in fiddling while the new Rome burns seems pathetic, presenting a picture of a church leader so intimidated by his country's Islamic majority that he cannot speak up for his dwindling flock even as its members are murdered at his doorstep," Allen wrote in her Jan. 25 review.

"On the other hand, Bartholomew's `green' crusade across Western Europe may actually represent a shrewd last-

ditch effort to secure a visible profile and powerful protectors for his beleaguered church."

Allen's perspective gained steam in the blogosphere, joined by Rod Dreher, an Orthodox convert who writes for the Dallas Morning News and Beliefnet, where he described the patriarch's book as "mostly dull pious bromides" that prompted him to keep "wondering when (Bartholomew) was going to talk about the challenge presented to Christians by Islam." But Bartholomew's supporters have lashed back, saying the book is not meant as a call to arms, but rather a pitch for environmental protection, Christian-Muslim coexistence and for Turkey's entry into the European Union as a way of improving religious freedom there.

The patriarch's precarious position as leader of a tiny religious minority in Turkey makes it admirable for him to address these topics at all, said the Rev. John Chryssavgis, Bartholomew's theological adviser on environmental issues.

"(Bartholomew) lives in the midst of an overwhelmingly Muslim population where he is deprived of his legal rights, a man whose church has for centuries lived alongside Muslim neighbors -- and yet, despite all this, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew can persistently advocate tolerance and peace," Chryssavgis said.

"He doesn't claim to have the answers; in this regard, he is humble. But he recognizes the urgency of the problem; in this regard, he is not in denial but realistic," he added.

Either way, the publication of another theological argument for environmentalism "can't hurt," said Roger S. Gottlieb, author of "A Greener Faith: Religious Environmentalism and our Planet's Future."

"His clear statement that pollution is a `moral' issue, and that polluting the world is a sin, casts the issue in the starkest possible religious terms, which certainly helps focus attention and demands a response from his followers," he said.

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