
A New Reformation (Together this Time!): Lutheran and Byzantine Christians for Ecological Justice

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Introduction

“**I**n some ways, Martin Luther’s world was not so different from ours. In 1517, old certainties were failing, and politics were in turmoil. New discoveries transformed understanding, and poisonous nationalisms emerged. Media technology altered how people received information. And most crucially, a crisis of faith marked his world. We suffer from a similar malady. . . .”¹ If this accurately describes our situation, it is no wonder that we are beginning to hear from diverse parts of the church a call for a *New Reformation*. In 2016, Lisa Dahill and James Martin-Schramm, two Lutheran theologians, published an anthology of essays calling for just such a Reformation in our own day, but this time, an *Eco-Reformation*, a Reformation centered not on the second article of the Creed as Luther had done, but centered, rather, on the *first* article of the Creed—on God’s creation—and on the need for grace and hope for a planet that is now in peril.

What I would like to do in this essay is to respond to the call for an Eco-Reformation by Lutheran theologians from the vantage point of a Christian trying to live and follow the Russian Orthodox Way, who is at the same time in full communion with the Bishop of Rome and the Western Catholic Church. While trying to think and to theologize out of the Byzantine Orthodox tradition, I am also grateful to acknowledge that one of the most important differences between a Reformation today and the Reformation of the sixteenth century, is that the Bishop of Rome is *no longer* the enemy. Ironically, white American Protestants may prove to be the most resistant to an Eco-Reformation in the twenty-first century because, as one Lutheran theologian has pointed out, they are the least likely people on earth to care about climate change. Pope Francis, by contrast, has emerged as the great champion. His 2015 encyclical, *Laudato Si’* used our overwhelming climate crisis as the entry point for a sweeping and majestic critique of modernity, one that has begun to open many minds.²

1. “Reformation 2.0. What Comes Next,” *Commonweal* (online edition). October 4,, 2017.

2. Bill McKibben, “Foreword” in *Eco-Reformation. Grace and Hope for a Planet in Peril*, Lisa E. Dahill and James B. Martin-Schramm, eds. (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers/Cascade

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When I, as a Russian Orthodox Christian-in-communion-with-Rome, look at Lutheranism, what do I see that might help to shape a common Christian witness in light of the challenges facing all of us due to accelerating climate change? Before I even get to any particular theological accents, I would point to the Lutheran acceptance of the need for ongoing, or perpetual, reformation in the church, as well as the willingness to give to certain issues what is known as *status confessionis*, a “confessional status,” as happened at the time of the sixteenth-century Reformation. I would argue that something similar is needed today, but this time it has to do with the first article of the Creed: “We believe in God, the Father, the all-ruling, maker of heaven and earth and of all things visible and invisible.” There is a need for what the Lutheran theologian David Rhoads has called a “clarion call for a new re-formation—an *Eco-Reformation*.”³

The renewal of commitment to the first article of the Creed on the part of Lutherans, Orthodox, and all Christians is the first and

Books, 2016), ix.

3. “A Theology of Creation. Foundations for an Eco-Reformation” in Dahill and Martin-Schramm, *Eco-Reformation*, 1.

most important step in a new shared reformation today. Given the state of the ecological crisis, I argue that it is expedient, perhaps even necessary, to identify the doctrine of creation, and all that it implies, as having *status confessionis* for all Christians, as well as for all theists and people of good will.

Beginning in the same place—the call to repentance

For us to begin looking at the first article of the Creed as *status confessionis* in light of the current ecological crisis and to allow this summons to have an effect on our lives beyond the purely abstract or theoretical, a new Eco-Reformation must begin, in a sense, where the old Reformation began—with a call to *repentance*. On October 31, 1517, when, according to the received tradition, Luther nailed his *Ninety-five Theses* to the door of the castle church in Wittenberg in order to begin an academic conversation about indulgences, he began, in thesis 1, with an assertion that has rumbled down the centuries and which now has a significance and poignancy that we dare not ignore: “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said ‘repent,’ he intended the entire life of believers to be repentance.” Let me repeat that: repentance means that the “entire life of believers [is] to be repentance.” We get closer to what Luther was getting at with regard to repentance, Martin Marty recently argued, when we no longer ask the question, “What kind of person *was* I that I could do such a thing?” but begin to ask, “What kind of person *am* I that I can do such a thing?”⁴

This question, I would argue, is exactly the question all of us to need to ask ourselves if there is to be a new reformation: What kind of person am I who can pollute the earth without even thinking about it? What kind of person am I who can refuse to change the way I live even as I witness the extinction of whole species of animals, the rising of sea levels, the warming of the oceans, and the increase of global temperature? What kind of person am I who will do all that I can to maintain my own standard of living, celebrate beautiful liturgies, and pray to God while the poor of the earth suffer from drought, dwindling economic resources, and severe civil conflict? “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said ‘repent, he intended the entire life of believers to be repentance.” We need to hear Luther’s call as a mind change and a behavior change, both individually and collectively. To make this shift as church, we need theologies and practices that are earth-friendly and creation-centered.⁵

The free gift of God: In creation as well as in salvation

Our repentance leads us to turn in a double direction then, toward God and toward our neighbor; our neighbor, we should understand, now includes the earth itself. When we stand before

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God, we know that we do so, not through any merit on our own part, but because of God’s mercy and love toward us. Luther was insistent upon this as being the very heart of the *gospel* and what it means to be *justified* before God. Salvation as the free gift of God through Jesus the Christ has thundered down the centuries as the cornerstone of the Lutheran doctrine of justification by grace through faith. The 1999 Lutheran-Catholic *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* testifies to our common capacity to understand the historic Lutheran concerns, not as a sectarian reading of the tradition, but as something thoroughly catholic.

While Byzantine Christians are more at home within the conceptual framework of *theosis* or *deification* than within the framework of justification, it is important that we also acknowledge that the Lutheran concern embodied in the Doctrine of Justification is not foreign to the Eastern tradition.⁶ If, as Lutherans argue, justification is the shaping center of all Christian theology, then it would be necessary to interpret the first article of the Creed, the doctrine of creation, in light of justification, and to emphasize that before we venture into the specific human problem and its solution (the second article of the Creed), we need to begin once again with *creation*, no less than salvation, as the *free gift of God* rooted in the *mercy* of God. As the prayer after the Our Father

4. October 31, 1517. *Martin Luther and the Day that Changed the World* (Brewster: Paraclete Press, 2016), 11.

5. David M. Rhoads, “A Theology of Creation,” *Eco-Reformation*, 5.

6. See, e.g., the ascetical treatise, “On Those Who Think That They Are Made Righteous by Works” in the *Philokalia*. G.E.H. Palmer, Philip Sherard, Kallistos Ware, ed., *The Philokalia*, vol. 1 (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), 125–126.

in the Byzantine Divine Liturgy puts it, “We give thanks to You, O King invisible, who by Your measureless power did make all things, and in the greatness of Your mercy did bring all things from non-existence into being.”

In other words, we must begin again to see the earth precisely as *creation*, as something sacred, personal, and invested with meaning and intrinsic dignity, and not simply as an object, a thing, a natural world, the value of which is determined entirely by its commodified value for us human beings, as Rasmussen puts it.⁷ Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople similarly expressed this idea of creation as gift when he wrote, “In the Orthodox liturgical perspective, creation is received and conceived as a gift from God. The notion of creation-as-gift defines our Orthodox theological understanding of the environmental question in a concise and clear manner while at the same time determining the human response to that gift through the responsible and proper use of the created world.”⁸ Rediscovering the creation as *gift* has the potential, then, to enable all of us to re-read and to rediscover the *cosmic* dimension of *salvation* itself, which has been so strongly and continuously emphasized in the Eastern Christian theological and liturgical tradition.⁹

Freedom for a purpose— to preserve the creation

The Lutheran doctrine of justification by grace through faith, no less than the Eastern Christian doctrine of theosis, is not only about the restoration of our personal relationship with God, but is also about the *transformation of our relationships with others*. Justification is not only freedom *from* sin and brokenness; it is also freedom *for* a purpose, as Luther forcefully argued in his 1520 *Treatise on Christian Liberty*. Love of God and love of neighbor, for Luther and for Lutherans, is a theological identity that guides all of life and establishes Christian identity. In the 2016 collection, *The Forgotten Luther: Reclaiming the Social-Economic Dimension of the Reformation*, Cynthia Moe-Lobeda argues that Luther never wavered from his double-pronged belief that while “works do not cause salvation,” they are a vital and necessary part of life for those justified in Christ. The norm of “neighbor-love” pertains to every aspect of life.

In the *Large Catechism*, for example, Luther argued that the

7. Larry L. Rasmussen, “Creation-Not for Sale,” *Eco-Reformation*, 24–26.

8. Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople, *Encountering the Mystery: Understanding Orthodox Christianity Today* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 98.

9. See, e.g., Patriarch Bartholomew’s September 1, 1996, message in which he ties together these themes and asserts that God has “entrusted to us Christians the proclamation of the gospel, this joyful message of reconciliation, of the new, loving communion of God with humankind and the natural world”. John Chryssavgis, ed., *Cosmic Grace. Humble Prayer. The Ecological Vision of the Green Patriarch Bartholomew*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 47–48. See also Metropolitan Johan Zizoulas, “Orthodoxy and Ecological Problems: A Theological Approach” (<http://www.orth-transfiguration.org/orthodoxy-and-ecological-problems/>)

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commandment against murder is a prohibition not only against actively killing a person, but also a prohibition against *failing to preserve his/her life*, an argument not unlike the one used by St. John Chrysostom in his homilies on Lazarus and the poor man.¹⁰ Using Luther’s logic, we can rightly argue that “neighbor-love,”—which flows out of our partaking freely and consciously in the “great mystery of divine love” that follows the creation and constitutes “the reconciliation with God, through Christ, with humankind and the entirety of creation”—to use Patriarch Bartholomew’s words, *requires us, mandates us, and demands of us* that we do everything within our power to fight to preserve the creation. It is not an *adiaphoron*, to use a Lutheran category. To paraphrase Luther’s words from the *Large Catechism*, “it will do us no good to plead that we did not contribute to the death of this earth by word or deed; we will have done so, for we withheld our love from the earth.”

The human vocation: priests of creation

Closely linked to the call for us to live out “neighbor-love” toward the earth and all its inhabitants is the realization that all the baptized in some way share in priestly ministry. Priesthood is not only about who baptizes, confirms, marries, hears confession, anoints with oil, and stands at the Eucharistic table. Even if, as the Lutheran theologian Timothy J. Wengert has rightly argued, there is no mention of a so-called “priesthood of all believers” in the *Book of Concord*, and that such an idea is really the invention of later Pietists, Luther did, however, insist on one spiritual “*stand*” or “*walk of life*” or “*single estate*” of all Christians, rooted in baptism

10. Meghan Johnston Aelabouni, “Freed in Christ to serve the neighbor: 500 years of Lutherans in action,” *Living Lutheran* (<https://www.livinglutheran.org/2017/10/freed-christ-serve-neighbor/>).

See also, Theodore G. Tappert, trans. & ed., *The Book of Concord* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 390–391; cf. St. John Chrysostom’s first two homilies on Lazarus and the poor man, *On Wealth and Poverty* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Press, 1984), 19–55.

and making the entire church into a “*sacerdotal priesthood*.”¹¹ The value of the Lutheran accent on a “single Christian estate,” especially in light of the ecological crisis, is that it adamantly affirms the responsibility of the *entire* church, both pastors and lay people, to live in a way consistent with baptism. A variety of vocations there may be, but all who are baptized do have vocations, the goal of which is to serve the common good.¹²

In this sense, priesthood is really about *what kind of people all of us are* when we come out of the waters of the baptismal font. This Lutheran idea is not so different from the Eastern theology of a “*royal priesthood*” created by baptism and the Holy Spirit, which is commemorated and celebrated in the Eucharistic Anaphora of St. Basil: “Releasing us from the delusions of idolatry, [Christ] guided us to the sure knowledge of You, the true God and Father. He acquired us for Himself, as His chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation. Having cleansed us by water and sanctified us with the Holy Spirit, He gave Himself as ransom to death in which we were held captive, sold under sin.”¹³

A contemporary Eastern Christian parallel to the Lutheran theology of a “single Christian priestly estate” taken up by a number of theologians is that of the vocation of all human beings to be “*priests of creation*.” With reference to the ecological crisis, the Armenian Orthodox moral theologian Vigen Guroian has argued that being priests of creation means that human beings have been given the task to mediate God’s presence and God’s care to the rest of creation. As human beings, we are called out by the very act through which God creates us to be priests and stewards of creation. The predominant metaphor for humankind’s role in relation to creation has that of “stewardship,” an image regularly used in Christian ecological discussions and, while useful, it is not sufficient, Guroian argues. The presiding biblical metaphor in Orthodox ecological thinking is that of the human being as “priest of creation.”

Under the rubric of stewardship, nature can still remain only some kind of property given into our hands for efficient and productive use. What is needed by human beings is an understanding of God’s blessings at the creation which calls for our response of thanksgiving and blessing, a fundamentally priestly act. “At the center of the ecological problem is the fact,” Guroian asserts, “that the original blessing [in Genesis] has turned to curse. Only humanity’s willing embrace of its priestly and eucharistic vocation will remedy the deep ontological disharmony of the created order.”¹⁴ Guroian’s argument is rooted in the liturgical theology

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of the late Father Alexander Schmemmann. Already in the 1970s, Schmemmann focused intently on the implications of the priestly vocation of humanity for ecological thinking.¹⁵

What Eastern Christian theologians say about the human priestly vocation is summed up liturgically when the celebrant, in the name of the Eucharistic assembly, elevates the bread and wine and sings, “Your own of Your own we offer unto You on behalf of all and for all!” Here we find the ritualization of what the human vocation is in relation to creation. If the Lutheran theology of the single priestly estate of all Christians could be joined to this Orthodox understanding of human beings as priests of creation, the new Eco-Reformation would have, I believe, a powerful and compelling ecumenical vision.

Our common sacramental vision: The earth as sacrament

The last gift of Lutheran theology to which I would like to appeal—and which is very much related to the human priestly act of offering and blessing—is what Larry Rasmussen calls the Lutheran “sacramental imagination.” As is well known, the sixteenth-century Reformation split over the understanding of sacraments, especially over the understanding of Eucharistic Presence. Luther and his followers placed themselves clearly on the side of the Church of Rome and the Eastern Orthodox over against those who became known as “sacramentarians.” Article 10 of the *Augsburg Confession* made the straight-forward affirmation, which the reforming party believed would be accepted as Catholic by the Emperor and Roman theologians, that: “Of the Supper of the Lord [we] teach that the body and blood of Christ are truly present, and are distributed to those who eat the Supper of the Lord.”

In the controversies over the Eucharist that emerged within the reforming movement, Luther remained adamant about the real presence in the Mass, relegating, however, the doctrine of transubstantiation to the level of an overly fussy and unnecessary

tendom. Toward an Ecclesial Christian Ethic (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 1994), 159–161.

¹⁵ *Of Water and the Spirit* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1974), 96; Guroian, *Ethics after Christendom*, 161.

11. “The Priesthood of All Believers and Other Pious Myths” (2006). *Institute of Liturgical Studies Occasional Papers*, 117 (http://scholar.valpo.edu/ils_papers/117); Luther, “Open Letter to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate” (1520) *Works of Luther*, (Philadelphia: A. J. Holman Company, 1915). <https://web.stanford.edu/~jsabol/certainty/readings/Luther-ChristianNobility.pdf>

12. See Luther’s “Open Letter to the Christian Nobility.”

13. translation of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America (<https://www.goarc.org/-/the-divine-liturgy-of-saint-basil-the-great>)

14. “Ecological Ethics: An Ecclesial Event” in *Ethics after Chris-*

philosophical theory trying to explain *how* exactly Christ is present in the Mass. His language of “in, with, and under” the bread and wine was his concession in trying to saying something more about the Eucharistic Presence. This language was misconstrued by both Catholics and Calvinists as the doctrine of “consubstantiation” and happened largely, I believe, because Luther in his *Small Catechism* used the “under” preposition for catechetical purposes: “It is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ *under* the bread and wine, instituted by Christ Himself for us Christians to eat and to drink.”

Luther’s primary way of referring to the real presence was, however, more straightforward and literal: “the bread *is* the Body of Christ” without further explanation.¹⁶ In his 1528 *Confession Concerning Christ’s Supper*, Luther even expressed his concern as to how the “in, with, and under” language could be misused by his sacramentarian opponents.¹⁷ The Byzantine anaphora of St. Basil expresses the real presence in a way not unlike that of Luther. The *metabole* or change that occurs in the Eucharist means that the bread is consecrated in order *to be* and *to reveal* Christ’s body. At the epiclesis, the priest prays that the Holy Spirit might come down on the bread and wine to “bless (*eulogisai*), to sanctify (*agiasai*) and to show/disclose (*anadeizai*) this bread to be the precious Body of our Lord, God, and Savior Jesus Christ, and this cup to be the precious Blood of our Lord, God and Savior Jesus Christ.”¹⁸

Luther found the Western theology of transubstantiation unnecessary and problematic, having come to the conclusion that real bread and wine remain in the celebration of the Eucharist.¹⁹ The Orthodox sacramental theologian Fr. Alexander Schmemmann similarly concluded that the Aristotelian categories of “essence” and “accidents” embedded in the Western language of transubstantiation were deeply problematic, as was also the medieval Western rejection of symbolism in sacramental theology. Schmemmann regarded both of these Western medieval tendencies as alien to an authentic Orthodox understanding of the sacraments.

The problem that Schmemmann saw in medieval Roman Catholic sacramental theology is that it ceased to understand “symbols” as a fundamental *revelation* about the *world and creation*. In the Orthodox experience, a sacrament is primarily a revelation of the *sacramentality* of creation itself. The world was created and given to human beings for “conversion of creaturely life into participation in divine life.” The heart of sacramental symbols is that one reality, such as bread, *manifests* and *communicates* another reality, such as the Body of Christ. In other words, sacraments function *epiphantically*. The idea that something of the creation has to be destroyed or lost, as the doctrine of transubstantiation might be understood (the substance of bread and wine no longer exist), is, Schmemmann concluded, entirely alien to the Orthodox under-

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standing of the divine presence in the sacraments.²⁰

This Eastern understanding of the sacraments bears marked similarities to that of the Lutheran understanding and has a great deal to say about how we understand the creation itself. For Luther, no less than for Schmemmann, the entire universe is alive with the presence and the power of God in Jesus and in the Spirit. All material reality is sacred and so is worthy of reverence. In a letter of Luther to Zwingli on the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, Luther wrote that “God is as present in our cabbage soup as in the sacrament. The difference is that God is hidden in the soup and revealed in the sacrament.”²¹

Despite his polemic against “seeing” and in favor of “hearing,” rooted undoubtedly in his theology of the cross over against the theology of glory, we find in Luther a rich theological appreciation of *nature*. He depicts God as being “with all creatures, flowing, and pouring into them, filling all things.” He marvels at a grain of wheat, which, if we really understood it, would cause us to die of wonder. It is the incarnation, Luther argues, that enables us to know the grandeur of the whole creation: “When I truly grasp the significance of the incarnation of the Son of God in this world, all creatures will appear a hundred times more beautiful to me than before.” Luther’s affirmation of the principle of *finitum capax infiniti* is the fundamental principle of his theology of creation, Christology, the sacraments, soteriology, and eschatology. God is wondrously and gloriously “in, with, and under” all things.²²

Both Lutherans and Eastern Christians, then, have sacramental traditions that encourage us to see not only the sacramental rites of the church as places of divine presence, but to see the entire world bristling with what Byzantine Christians call the “energies of God.” “The world is a burning bush of God’s energies,” as St. Gregory Palamas put it. Luther’s theology of the cross, with its idea of *revelatio Dei sub contrario specie* (the revelation of God under the appearance of the opposite) is similarly deeply sacramental. It tells us that God is revealed in the last place you or I would reasonably look,²³ yet God is there. The Lutheran insistence that the finite can bear the infinite (*finitum capax infiniti*) means that God’s abode is the material universe. Luther, in a thoroughly sacramental stance, was boldly pan-en-theisticall in God, God is in

20. *The Eucharist* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1988), 29–40.

21. Larry Rasmussen, “Lutheran Sacramental Imagination,” *Journal of Lutheran Ethics* (2/12/2014).

22. Quoted from H. Paul Santmire and John B. Cobb Jr., “The World of Nature According to the Protestant Tradition” in Robert S. Gottlieb, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology* (Oxford: University Press, 2006), 119–120; Luther, *Weimar Ausgabe* 10.143; 19.496; *Weimar Ausgabe-Tischreden*, no. 1160.

23. Wengert, “The Priesthood of All Believers....” 98.

16. Vol. 36 of *Luther’s Works; Word and Sacrament III*, ed. Robert H. Fischer (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1961), 300.

17. *Ibid.*, 306.

18. Translation of the Orthodox Church in America; for the Greek text, see *Ieratikon* (Athens: Apostoliki Diakoni, 1981), 134.

19. See e.g., 1520 *Babylonian Captivity of the Church*: 2.23.

all.²⁴ Or, as Bishop Kallistos Ware similarly put it, “As Christians we affirm not pantheism, but ‘panentheism.’ God is *in* all things yet also *beyond* and *above* all things.”²⁵

Orthodox theologians, such as Fr. John Chryssavgis, insist that the sacramental life of the church teaches us that because of the sacramental dimension of the entire world, there is nothing whatsoever that is secular or profane. God is, and is within, the very constitution of our world.²⁶ This means, then, that “the earth is sacrament,” a central feature of the sacramental ethos of the Orthodox Church. Our real problem, Chryssavgis says, is that “we have been conditioned to consider the sacraments in a narrow, reductionist manner: a fixed number of sacraments, so that all else assumes a non-sacramental tone; minimal requirements for the validity of sacraments, so that all else becomes unsacramental in nature; and an overemphasis on the hierarchical structure of the church or the ritualistic nature of liturgy, so that all else falls outside the margins of salvation and sacredness. We need,” he argues, “to recall the sacramental principle, which ultimately demands from us the recognition that nothing in life is profane or unsacred.”²⁷

Our common Byzantine and Lutheran sacramental vision gives us a way of understanding the world that may be able to create in us a simultaneously ancient and yet new way of looking at and relating to this earth. It may be able to save us from all those “movements and powers within us that are disordered, unnatural and hostile to God’s creation,” in the words of St. Maximus the Confessor.²⁸ Receiving the earth as sacrament means, as Fr. Chryssavgis so aptly puts it, that “We should respond to nature with the same delicacy, sensitivity and tenderness with which we respond to a person in a relationship.” Our failure to do this is the fundamental source of the ecological crisis that now stares us in the face. The time has come, he says, and *we all* should say, “to stop treating even things like things!”²⁹

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24. Rasmussen, “Creation-Not for Sale,” *Eco-Reformation*, 32.

25. *The Orthodox Way* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1979), 58.

26. Chryssavgis, “A New Heaven and a New Earth: Orthodox Theology and an Ecological Worldview” in *Creation-Not for Sale* (LWF), 60.

27. “The Earth as Sacrament. Insights from Orthodox Christian Theology and Spirituality” in Robert S. Gottlieb, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology* (Oxford: University Press, 2006), 92–93.

28. Chryssavgis, “A New Heaven and a New Earth: Orthodox Theology and an Ecological Worldview” in *Creation-Not for Sale* (LWF), 60; St. Maximus the Confessor, *To Thalassius*, chapter 51.

29. Quoted in Rasmussen, “Creation-Not for Sale,” *Eco-Reformation*, 28–29.