

From solidarity with all creatures to the denunciation of wrong paths

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The most straightforward response to the task given in the title would be to outline a historical overview of churches' engagement in actions on care for creation in recent decades. In doing so we should not have to miss and to remind in particular the World Council of Churches (WCC) initiative and commitment on Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation initiated in 1983 Assembly, the call of the Ecumenical Patriarch Dimitrios from 1989 to allocate time in liturgical calendars to focus on care for creation, outcomes of three European Ecumenical Assemblies, as well as the encyclical letter *Laudato Si*. We should look into their content and analyse their scope and achievements. Here, however, we will undertake a different approach. We will be focusing on some specific elements unavoidably linked with the given title.

1. Care for creation – an integral part of Christian faith

What is the relation between faith or religion and ecology? What and how can faith contribute in responding to current ecological challenges?

In approaching these questions from a challenging perspective offering interesting insights on our situation nowadays, let's look into the history. An exciting reading offer in this regard Jewish resources. In doing so, let's look at the wisdom of one of the most appreciated scholars, Maimonides. Maimonides, in the Hebrew acronym Rambam, was born in Cordoba in early 12th century. He is widely considered an outstanding post-biblical representative of Jewish teaching, and is acknowledged as one of the most important rabbinical teachers and philosophers in Jewish history.

In looking for a response to the questions above, we can revoke Rambam's apparently simple formulation reminding us the substance of the problem. In his book *The Guide for the Perplexed* he says, "The general object of the Torah (religion, faith) is two-fold: the well-being of the soul and the well-being of the body." To this he adds, by the well-being of the soul is meant an understanding of to the limits of mortal capacity, and understanding of the nature of creation. The well-being of the body guides us to the "proper management of the relations in which we live with one another." Which in substance, as he underlines, means: the removal of injustice and violence from our midst.

An unusual and very interesting definition of what faith or religion is and what is its main purpose. It does not highlight relationship to transcendence. And, as the matter of fact, there is very little about what we consider as specific marks of religion today.

Religion in Maimonides' understanding, and I believe this is what we may take from this argumentation in pondering about challenges of 21st century and the role of faith in responding to these challenges, is first of all about cultivating the relationship in an existential triangle: man – nature – society. We are living with and in creation and have responsibility for creation. This must not be separated from concerns for other human beings. Responsibility for creation means that the concern for creation is not, and must not be the

concern for uninhabited creation. Care for creation reminds us the centrality of the human being in creation; his and her tasks, and responsibilities. At the same time, it reminds us that we, the human beings are those, who are mostly benefiting from the gifts of creation. Human beings are at the same time subjects and objects of creation care.

In reflecting on the role of faith and religion in addressing the topic of care for creation we must not miss an additional aspect, which is the consideration of time. Another old wisdom with roots in pre-biblical times says that faith is teaching us in particular three things:

- The principles of faith outline the right way of life; they remind us what we should do.
- They remind us as well, what we should not do.
- Finally, and this is the most interesting part, they warn us that in order to choose the right path, we must not miss the right moment. The substance of this warning is, that it is quite a danger that we may miss the right path not only by lacking the willingness, or through an insufficient commitment. We may fail also through not acting in the right time.

This reminds us a remarkable and noteworthy fact that in responding the question of the relationship between faith and ecology, it is not enough to plea for acknowledgment of human responsibility for creation. It includes to act responsibly in the right moment.

Other dimensions need to be taken into consideration as well. To do what is right, includes an emphasis on justice. Challenges of climate change and related effects are an issue of justice. It is the poorest who suffer the most to adapt, facing issues such as extreme weather, lack of food, and loss of land. It is unjust that those who have contributed the least, the poor, and those living in developing countries, as well as future generations, are and will suffer the most. It is not just to use, misuse, consume and plunder excessively world's resources and leave the consequences for future generations.

But even that, as much as it is important, is not enough. There is an immense need to acknowledge the urgency of the issue, the necessity to decide in the right moment. To act now.

2. Science and faith: The need for a dialogue.

In churches we need to learn to engage in a dialogue with science. Part of such a dialogue is admitting the fact that science is not limited to dealing with facts. Ethics is a necessary component of science as well. In churches, we need to learn how to deal with products of science. Respect them and work with them.

All of this is very actual now. In thinking about care for creation and especially climate change we cannot and must not avoid to keep in mind the message from the last report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). I have in mind in particular three moments summarizing the content of the report.

The first message of the report is that if we do not come with a rapid and effective reaction to climate change, the consequences are much more dramatic and far reaching than previously expected. All of us are affected. And we all need to find a way on how to cooperate on the response to the thread.

The second warning is, we need to act now. In order to keep the target 1.5 ° C we do not have more than 20 to 30 years.

Finally, the third part is the most difficult. I am not sure if we were able yet to understand it fully. The report speaks that if 1.5 ° C is to be achievable, there are to be achieved within 20 to 30 years zero carbon emissions. This is, however, a daunting task. Zero emissions mean no use of cars, no flights, no use of cement, no use of plastics, at least not as we know them today, and all of them based on an extensive use of carbon. This also raises questions about heating systems, industrial production cycles etc. Can we achieve it? Perhaps yes, however only if we do not continue as we have done by now.

It is often said that the role of the Church is to remind ethical and moral aspects of the problems we have to face. To highlight moral dimension. This might be correct, but this does not cover in any case the whole truth. The task of the Church is not to be reduced to morality. The responsibility of the churches belongs, among other things, to highlight the reminder: Act! Do not miss a chance, by your inability to decide, by your failure or incompetence to act. In the right way and in the right moment!

Climate change, plundering of nature, loss of biodiversity etc. are acute threats of 21st century. The IPCC report is reminding us the urgency of the situation. ECEN statement in this respect underlines: “We cannot claim any more than we do not know.” And, we need to act now.

3. Churches’ work in responding to ecological challenges, networking and ecumenical cooperation: The role of ECEN

The European Christian Environmental Network (ECEN) is a particular and very specific churches’ response to the ecological challenges that have emerged in the last couple of decades. At the same time, ECEN is a response to internal process within the churches rediscovering care for creation within their own theological traditions. Ecumenical relations play in this regard an important role.

The 2nd European Ecumenical Assembly (EEA) organised in 1997 jointly by the Conference of European Churches (CEC) and the Council of European Bishops’ Conferences (CCEE) adopted the recommendation to create an ecumenical network enabling closer cooperation in area of care for creation between CEC and CCEE. ECEN is a response to this call.

The 3rd EEA took place in 2007. In following the same spirit as the previous Assembly used for the first time the term “ecological justice”. The Assembly called for a consultative process that would be addressing European responsibility for ecological justice and the threat of climate change. At the same time the Assembly recommended that the period from the 1 September to 4 October should be dedicated to prayer for the protection of creation and the promotion of sustainable lifestyles reversing our contribution to climate change.

Following these recommendations that framework for ECEN is based on three pillars:

- Encouraging and supporting practical grassroots initiatives of churches; offering a forum for sharing, dialogue, exchange of experience and mutual support, promoting cooperation and opportunity to speak in a united voice.
- Being engaged in deepening theology of creation. Care for creation is an indistinguishable, integral and authentic part of Christian theology. Along with

that theological contributions to care for creation offer a prominent space for an ecumenical cooperation and joint theological engagement.

- Liturgy. ECEN have played a pivotal role in promoting Time/Season of Creation.

Christian action in care for creation needs to be clear, distinguishable and authentic. There is the need of a genuine action from the churches, which is not a duplication of what others are doing. Many times with substantial financial resources and often doing very good job. Essential in this respect is clarity about Christian motivation and theological fundamentals of Christian engagement in this action.

4. Theology: Key theological concept of hope

Hope is one of the key theological categories. Often used in not very reflected way. Routinely, hope is used as a term summarizing a wish for an easy escape from the difficulties we suddenly face.

A lot can and perhaps needs to be said about hope from biblical and Christian perspective. Let's limit ourselves in this moment to some aspects having crucial relevance in relation to themes addressed in this meeting: ecology and climate change. First of all, hope is not to be limited to optimism. A number of studies have emerged recently about hope. Think tanks, academic institutions, as well as theological faculties and others study hope, produce articles, are engaged in scientific projects about hope. Having all this in mind, I cannot refrain from quoting the person not coming from a specific church setting. But in addressing the theme of hope he was referring to religious connotations linked to the term. Vaclav Havel's words on hope are appealing. He underlines that "hope is not the same as optimism. It's not the conviction that something will turn out well. It is the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out."

What is then the content of hope? What does it mean to speak about hope in times of threatening climate change? Especially, if it is not to be a predicate of an easy optimism, or an expression of an expectation of an unwarranted positive end?

In talking about hope, scripture uses predominantly the language of prophets. In this regard we are reminded how important is to distinguish between false and real prophets, and to distinguish real hope from false hope. We are reminded by acknowledged theologians that the key moment allowing to distinguish between both is very concrete and very specific call of the real prophets to personal repentance, to recognition of the wrong doing and a prayer for others. This is precisely, what false prophets did not do. This is as well, where our hope needs to be distinguished from its epigones.

In this regard it is not possible to avoid the question of relationship of ecology to economy, as well as to numerous personal choices and preferences included under the heading "ecological justice". It is not possible anymore to reduce ecology and care for creation to only "a green issue". It is effectively linked to questions of our lifestyle, to our ways of production and consumption, as well as to difficult questions of personal and collective costs and economic implications of necessary ecological transformation.

We need to be aware of the fact that global consumption of natural resources, as statistically counted in 2017, is as if we had at disposal more than one planet. As a matter of fact, the figure is 1,7 planets. The simple fact is that we consume close to two times more than we

have at the disposal. Our ecological footprint is too high. Natural resources are not anymore in position to be renewed. And this still in the situation of an existing big gap between the consumption in rich and industrially developed part of the world on one side, and those less developed parts on the other side. If all of them would consume as much as we do in our part of the world, and there is no reason to deny anyone the right for equality, overall demands on consumption of humanity and ecological footprint would be much higher than they are now. And we are demanding more and more. We still believe that our consumption need to grow more and more. Without limits. This is what drives our economies, this is what leads us to prosperity and happiness. The task of the churches is to be clear about this warning. The future will require us to face dramatic and very difficult choices.

To speak about meaningful future and hope in this situation is of significant relevance. In this regard I would like to turn attention to the last statement produced at the ECEN Assembly in October 2018.

The document underlines that, in spite of difficulties we are facing, we want a “future with hope.” The text then continues: “Hope that derives from our faith; A hope that is not a naïve or wishful. Hope which gives sense to what we will undertake.”

“Science can tell us what is happening; faith tells us why we must respond. To give life on earth a future with hope we must act now. We are now informed and we have no excuses! It is not an option to ignore the science nor to become paralysed by fear.

In John chapter 6:1-11 we learn of the feeding of the five thousand and of the importance of sharing. It is a vulnerable child who brings loaves and fish. The act of sharing that comes from the child and is an inspiration and a path for us to follow. Sharing, not greed, is the way to climate justice.

Individually and collectively we must reduce our environmental impact and in particular our carbon footprints. The extractive economy and lifestyle we know and enjoy are not sustainable. Structures and patterns of consumption and production must change very rapidly to a low carbon economy with a more just distribution of resources.

What is needed? To build a new narrative of hope that addresses the seriousness of the situation but also promises a vision of more just and sustainable future.”

An important and vital aspect of hope we are talking about, having in mind especially Christian hope, is the fact that such hope includes the radical readiness to share. In practical terms, the first reaction to such a demand for sharing is to look at the possessions we have and assessing what we can get rid of. Now we are reminded that this is not enough. There is the need to go beyond usual materialistic understanding. We are called to share as well, what is not necessarily our property. Hope is not and cannot be our property.

This is the core of what is sometimes called “a paradoxical nature of Christian faith,” which says: you may not “have” something. But through your readiness to share and through act of sharing you may get even what you do not have. Hope is not and cannot be our property. Still, we are called to share it. It means to go in our approach to hope over a wide spread assumption that we may share only what is in our possession.

Our work in ECEN includes an invitation for all churches and Christians to get engaged in work on care for creation and to make it indeed visible part of our faith, as well as to the commitment of the ECEN to contribute to such efforts.