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Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew: WHERE HEAVEN MEETS EARTH: A Meditation on Faith, Science, and our Planet - Address delivered on Acceptance of the Templeton Prize (New York, September 24, 2025)



WHERE HEAVEN MEETS EARTH: A Meditation on Faith, Science, and our Planet

+B A R T H O L O M E W

Archbishop of Constantinople-New Rome and Ecumenical Patriarch

Address delivered on Acceptance of the Templeton Prize

(New York, September 24, 2025)

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Mr Vice President,

Your Excellencies,

Ἐξοχώτατε κύριε Πρωθυπουργέ τῆς Ἑλλάδος

Venerable Religions Representatives,

Former chair of the Templeton Prize Miss Dill,

Distinguished guests, dear friends,

Standing before you as this year's recipient of the Templeton Prize, I am struck by the weight of a recognition that surely belongs not to an individual, but to a vision that has animated the Ecumenical Patriarchate for over three decades: that the God who breathed stars and humans into being is the same God who grieves when a single sparrow falls, when a coral reef bleaches white as bone, and when a child gasps for clean air.

Introduction

I accept this honor on behalf of my saintly predecessor, Ecumenical Patriarch Demetrios, whose prophetic voice first called our Church to embrace its role as guardian of creation in 1989. In the years that ensued, all Orthodox Churches as well as the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican Communion, along with countless Christian confessions and ecumenical organizations, have heeded the call of the Ecumenical Patriarchate for a time of prayer for the protection of the natural environment to be reserved annually for September 1st.

My profound gratitude is also extended to the John Templeton Foundation, the Templeton World Charity Foundation, and the Templeton Religion Trust for stewarding the administration of this remarkable award and daring to believe that the marriage of scientific rigor and spiritual vigor might yet save us from ourselves. Their values to “push the boundaries of scientific and spiritual understanding” (from the Templeton Foundation website) challenge us to understand the interconnection of both.

1.A Cosmic Liturgy

Through the centuries, we have witnessed a tragic alienation—religion withdrawing to its sanctuaries, science retreating to its laboratories, each suspicious of the other's claims upon truth. For far too long, faith and science have circled each

other cautiously, sometimes approaching mutual reconciliation, more often hardening into reciprocal incomprehension.

Yet this separation was never meant to be. The fourth-century Church Father and mystic Gregory of Nyssa understood what we have forgotten: that divine grace “pervades the whole creation, the lower nature being mixed with the supernatural.” There is no sacred and secular, no spiritual and material—only one truth, a single reality, shimmering with interconnection, pulsing with divine presence.

When I see a physicist measuring the acceleration of melting glaciers in the Arctic and a theologian contemplating the groans of creation (Romans 8.22–23), I see two people reading the same book—the book of nature and the book of scripture—in different languages. When I witness a climate scientist’s agony over dying forests and hear the prophet lament that “the earth is utterly torn and violently shaken” (Isaiah 24.19), I recognize the same broken heart beating in both. The disassociation between faith and science must end. They are both on the same page.

2.The Art of Getting it Right

Religion has perfected certain forms of failure and success alike, and honesty compels me to name them. For example, during the COVID pandemic, some chose conspiracy theories over epidemiological data, prejudice over science, ideology over the simple mathematics of contagion and death. This is not faithful witness; it is spiritual malpractice.

When rising seas swallow islands and we speak only of divine sovereignty while ignoring carbon emissions, we become complicit in suffering. When ancient forests fall to feed our consumption and we offer only “thoughts and prayers” instead of systemic change, we practice a faith so detached from reality that it has ceased to be faith at all. At the same time, we get it wrong when we fail to connect the dots—between our throwaway culture and overflowing landfills, between fast fashion and carbon footprints, between our desire for convenience and the slow strangulation of rivers by plastic waste. We get it wrong when we treat environmental destruction as someone else’s problem instead of recognizing it as the spiritual crisis of our age.

Yet religion also possesses a unique gift for getting things magnificently right. We excel when we provide what the world desperately needs: the longer view, the deeper story, the bigger picture. We get it right when we remember that caring for

creation is not merely about climate change, but about changing ourselves—in fact about changing everything.

We get it right when we appreciate that caring for the environment is not simply about hugging trees—though the mystics remind us that trees, too, deserve our embrace—but about worshipping the God who chose to become flesh, who sanctified matter by dwelling in it. We get it right when we plant gardens in concrete wastelands, when we choose beauty over utility, silence over noise, communion over consumption. Such vision dissolves the artificial boundaries between contemplation and engagement. When we truly see, we understand that we must act.

3.The Measure of Prayer, Vigilance, and Discipline

We seem to have lost the sacred rhythm of natural time. In religious terminology, this is precisely what the power of prayer entails. Our ancestors understood something we have forgotten: namely, that meaningful growth requires patience, that depth demands duration. Trees do not hurry; stars do not rush their burning; mountains are not anxious about their rising. Unfortunately, we have created a civilization addicted to acceleration, where the speed of expansion matters more than the wisdom of appreciation, where instant gratification trumps sustainable flourishing. We have forgotten the joy of watching seeds become saplings, saplings become trees that will comfort and protect generations we will never meet.

This temporal vertigo afflicts especially our young people, who inherit a world where the future feels insecure and uncertain. Recent research reveals a mental health crisis directly linked to environmental anxiety among young people. And when our children lose hope for tomorrow, we must recognize this as both moral failure and spiritual emergency. Their fear is not irrational—it is symbolic; it is prophetic. They see what we have chosen not to see: that the world we are leaving them may be unsustainable and even unlivable. Against the numbing forces of indifference and despair, the Orthodox tradition offers the discipline of nepsis—watchful vigilance, the practice of staying alert or attentive to what is actually happening around us. Never has this ancient art been more urgently needed.

Consider the ship that caught fire and sank off Sri Lanka in 2021, creating what that nation's Supreme Court called “the largest recorded marine plastic spill in the world.” Countless marine animals were killed, while tons of plastic spread into waters that support millions of people. The billion-dollar fine imposed on the ship's owners cannot resurrect the lost marine life or restore the disrupted ecosystems.

But it represents a crucial recognition that environmental destruction has real costs that must be paid by those who cause it, and not simply absorbed by those who suffer from it. Nepsis requires us to see such disasters not as isolated incidents but as systemic symptoms that prioritize profit over protection and convenience over consequence.

The Orthodox Church also speaks of asceticism—not the grim self-denial often associated with the term, but the joyful self-discipline of discovering how much is enough. In a world drunk on consumption, this ancient wisdom offers a profound medicine for healing. Asceticism breaks the vicious circle of unreasonable and unrestrained greed—the endless cycle where more consumption requires more production, which demands more resources, which creates more waste, which necessitates more consumption to solve the problems created in the first place by consumption.

This is not at all about returning to pre-modern poverty or primeval innocence but about rediscovering what the Greek philosophers called *metron*—proper measure, the wonderful sense of proportion that allows both human flourishing and ecological balance. It is about choosing quality over quantity, durability over disposability, sufficiency over excess and waste. Such discipline ultimately becomes not burden but liberation—freedom from the exhausting treadmill of endless wanting, space to discover the deeper satisfactions that no amount of earthly consumption can provide.

4.A Theology of Inter-Connectedness

Finally, what we desperately need is a “theology of inter-connectedness”—a recognition that the health of our planet and the welfare of its people are not separate concerns but aspects of a single reality. Environmental justice and social justice are not distinct causes but different names for the same commitment to the flourishing and balance of all life.

This theology recognizes that we cannot heal our relationship with the planet without healing our relationships with each other. We cannot achieve environmental sustainability while maintaining social inequality. We cannot save the earth without practicing justice. This is precisely where the ecumenical imperative of caring for the natural environment emerges. After all, some may be more responsible or accountable for the crisis that we face in the present; but it is only together that we can respond to and resolve it for the future.

Standing at this crossroads, we face a choice that will echo through time: Will we

be remembered as the generation that, despite knowing better, chose comfort over conscience? Or will we be celebrated as the pioneers who, despite enormous challenges, chose transformation over destruction? In keeping with John Templeton's conviction that there is valuable synergy between science and religion, the scientific evidence is clear: we have limited time and resources to alter our trajectory. The spiritual resources are ample: traditions of wisdom have sustained human communities through previous transformations. And the technological tools exist: renewable energy, sustainable agriculture, regenerative design. What we lack is not knowledge or capability but willpower—the collective determination to choose difficult truths over convenient lies, systemic change over personal gain.

Conclusion

In closing, then, let me propose not answers but an appeal—to see the intersection of science and spirituality not as an intellectual exercise but as an existential necessity. The future of our planet depends on our capacity to bring together the precision of scientific method with the perception of spiritual vision, the urgency of prophetic witness with the patience of contemplative practice.

May we find the courage to speak truth to power and the wisdom to speak love to fear. May we discover that caring for creation is not a burden but a gift—the opportunity to participate in the ongoing creativity of the God who spoke worlds into being and still calls them “very good” (as in Genesis, chapter 1). And may we remember, even in dark moments, that every crisis is also an opportunity, every death the possibility of resurrection. The earth is groaning, but it is also hoping. The question is whether we will join its song of grief or its chorus of gratitude.

Thank you for your patience. And thank you once again for the esteemed honor of the Templeton Prize. May God bless you all.

photos: John Mindala / Archons









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