

A Sustainable Environment: Our Obligation to Protect God's Gift

by
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Halki Summit: Progressing Toward a Sustainable Environment

Last month, an outstanding conference on Global Responsibility and Environmental Sustainability was hosted by His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew along with Southern New Hampshire University and taking place at the Halki Theological School in Turkey. While the Rio +20 United Nations Conference on Sustainability was in progress about the same time drawing some 50,000 people, in Halki there were about 50 people including some renown environmentalists.

Patriarch Bartholomew opened the conference with an address to all the participants focusing on the lack of commitment by people to address issues like climate change, "... all of us are deeply frustrated with the stubborn resistance and reluctant advancement of earth-friendly policies and practices". The Patriarch went on to say that we are unwilling to accept personal responsibility and compared it the Orthodox Christian tradition which refers to this missing dimension as *ascesis*, which could be translated as abstinence and moderation, or simplicity and frugality. The people must distinguish between what we want and what we need, or what the world needs.

This was followed by an address by James Hansen, NASA's top climatologist and a professor at Columbia University. He discussed the current and future state of climate change with a strong recommendation for mitigation. He strongly believes in a carbon tax imposed on all fossil fuel generating companies with all of the funds distributed equally to each U.S. citizen. Since the energy companies would pass this tax on to the consumers, those citizens emitting less carbon would receive more money in the distribution than would pay in the tax. This is a plan I suggested in my June 2010 article.

Jane Goodall, the world renowned primatologist, travels so much that she is home, in England, about three days per month. In her travels, she became aware of so many young people that are concerned with the future of the environment. In particular, there are many children that grow up in an urban environment and don't see much green space. She founded a worldwide organization called "Roots and Shoots" to bring environmental awareness to future generations. She is also concerned that corporations are too concerned with next month's results and not sufficiently concerned with the next few decades. Dr. Goodall said, "We must convert intelligence to wisdom, and wisdom to wise decisions."

Bill McKibben, a global environmentalist and founder of 350.org, stated that 2012 was the warmest spring ever in the U.S. and that the earth's atmosphere will exceed 400 parts per million of carbon dioxide within 18 months -- the highest level in the last 800,000 years. The maximum target level as determined by James Hansen is 350 ppm. This high level of CO2 has caused the oceans to be 30% more acidic than 40 years ago. Each one degree Centigrade

increase in the atmospheric temperature reduces the agricultural productivity by 10%, something that cannot be accepted with a growing population. He was very critical of companies like Exxon that suggested to EPA that humans should be able to adapt to climate change rather than the company change its business model. "I'm not a theologian, but Exxon has more money than God", said McKibben. He then reiterated Hansen's recommendation to imposed a carbon tax as means of mitigating the climate change issue.

Gary Hirshberg, chairman and former CEO of Stonyfield Farm, gave a presentation on how he started a very successful and truly organic business. His suppliers were organic farms that were paid more for their products and confirmed loyalty to the business. Because of this higher cost of products, Stonyfield had a lower gross margin than its competitors but it enjoyed a higher net margin because of lower marketing costs. While the competition spent large sums on advertising Hirshberg believed in providing inexpensive incentives, such as coupons, directly to the consumers to develop loyalty, a strategy that has been very successful. Hirshberg recently sold 80% of the company to Danone but retained 60% of the control to make sure the company doesn't deviate from its successful strategy.

The final keynote speaker was Amory Lovins, founder and CEO of Rocky Mountain Institute. His presentation was a summary of his new outstanding book titled "Reinventing Fire". While Hansen and McKibben believe in the need of a carbon tax, Lovins believes that the climate change environmental issue can be mitigated with technology. He presented a convincing argument how companies, government agencies, NGOs and even individuals can adopt energy efficiency strategies to reduce carbon emissions, and then implement renewable energy technologies. He believes that we can be free of fossil fuels by 2050.

There were many other outstanding presentations at this conference including that of Metropolitan John of Pergamon. While reports from Rio claim that little came of that conference, the Halki Summit will lead to several initiatives that will have a long lasting positive impact on the environment. His All-Holiness Patriarch Bartholomew challenged us to force change among our political leaders, and went on to say that this movement is as critically urgent and as morally imperative as any campaign for fundamental human and civil rights. For more information on this conference, just go to www.halkisummit.org.