Headline: Climate and ‘the greatest spiritual crisis of our time’

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PARIS—One striking difference between the climate negotiations held in Copenhagen in 2009 and those that ended on Saturday night in this city was the new prominence given to the moral dimension. In the six years since the last attempt to forge a universal and binding agreement to arrest global warming failed, evidence of the serious consequences of climate change has mounted, putting a new emphasis on the vulnerability of the poor and the unprepared.

To the arguments from politics, economics and science have been added moral or spiritual imperatives. Pope Francis’ much-heralded encyclical on the environment, “Laudato Si,” has been invoked many times on the road to a Paris agreement. His special envoy to the Paris negotiations, Cardinal Peter Turkson, spoke often and pointedly about meeting the needs of the climate-vulnerable with compassion and solidarity. Other spiritual leaders also made themselves heard.

One of the side events of the 21st Conference of Parties meeting under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change was an interfaith exchange featuring the Greek Orthodox Metropolitan of Zimbabwe, Archbishop Serafim Kykotis; Dr. Saleemel Huq; and one of the world’s greatest living theologians, the Anglican archbishop emeritus of Canterbury, Rev. Rowan Williams.

Williams, in particular, offered a view of the conditions that led to the climate crisis, and of the dynamics that would lead to a viable new agreement, which I found striking and profoundly insightful. When I asked him to expand on his remarks, he favored me with an exegesis on the fly.

He was the first in the forum to speak.

“It seems to me that we face at the moment any number of interlocking global crises. And the crisis of resource represented by climate change—crisis of access to usable agricultural land, secure living space, clean water and so forth—that is going to be one of the major sources of conflict in the next half-century or more, unless we address as a matter of real urgency the issues and the demands that are in front of this conference this week. In other words, we’re not faced with a choice between a couple of good causes, either we interest ourselves in environment or we interest ourselves in peacemaking or perhaps we interest ourselves in development—these are all locked tightly together. And to my mind it is essential that we understand that interconnectedness.

“But to understand that is also to understand that we need a basic shift in our attitude to growth and prosperity. The myth that we are capable as a human race of endless economic expansion is exactly that: it’s a myth, and it’s a deeply dangerous one, and it’s going to be a murderous one.

“We need to think again about what security and prosperity means, without that [long pause] aspiration to infinite and unstoppable economic growth. If we can tackle that basic attitude, then we may be able to tackle some of the practical questions that confront us.

“It’s been said, and I think it’s probably worth saying again, that in human terms, the security of any person or any nation is bound up with the security of its neighbor. The earth is our neighbor. Without the security of the environment, there is no human security, there is no peace, there is no stability and confidence that we have access to what we need to live well. And it’s in that context

that I want to connect these issues as tightly as possible together."

There was very little room during the forum for an extended exchange [the UN facilitators were strict about schedules], but during the Q&A; Williams focused on the nub of that interconnectedness.

"The Patriarch [Bartholomew, leader of the Eastern Orthodox Church] says in his statement that this is fundamentally a spiritual question. And I think that for almost anybody from the historic faith communities, one of the most central spiritual questions there is is, Do we think of our environment as something that we possess or something we inhabit and share? Those are the two models, possession and sharing. Possession keeps coming back, and the trouble is I think that with governments now arguing over their status and their security in relation to one another, the very problem which creates the environmental crisis in the first place is being replayed in terms of international relations: people clinging on to advantage and silencing the voices of those who are most affected by it. And it seems to me that that central spiritual issue—Do we think of our relation as possession or sharing?—that is the pivot of so much."

After the forum ended, I had the chance to walk with Williams to the door; I asked him to say a little more about the central spiritual question. He said:

"I think the greatest spiritual disease of our time is the lust to possess: We've got to own the earth rather than inhabit it, live in it, and share it. Now, in Hebrew scripture, we read [that] God says to the people in the Law that the land does not belong to them. It's given for a purpose, it's given to till, to cultivate, so that life can be shared. As soon as you think it's a thing you can possess, then something's already wrong. But it's the same spiritual disease that makes people hang on to their power, and not share it."

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