

## Article

# Eco-Theology and Environmental Leadership in Orthodox and Evangelical Perspectives in Russia and Ukraine

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**Abstract:** Environmental leadership and eco-theology have not been a priority for Evangelical and Orthodox Christians in the countries of the former Soviet Union (particularly, Ukraine and Russia) due to various historical, political, social, and theological reasons. However, contemporary environmental global challenges suggest that both Orthodox and Evangelical Christians should revisit their perspectives and efforts related to responsible stewardship by humankind of the earth and its life forms. This article presents the analysis of multiple forms of data (relevant Orthodox and Evangelical documents, specialized literature, and individual interviews/focus groups). We conducted individual interviews and focus groups with 101 Evangelical and 50 Orthodox Christians from Russia and Ukraine. Although the majority of interviewees agreed that the ecological crisis exists and should be addressed, only some of them admitted that they actively care for creation. While Orthodox Christians are more active in practical care for creation, Evangelicals have a stronger grasp of the biblical teaching concerning nature and humans' responsibility for it. We argue that Evangelical and Orthodox Churches in Ukraine and Russia can learn from each other and impact their communities: engage minds, touch hearts, feed souls, and respond to environmental challenges as an expression of their faith and leadership.

**Keywords:** Orthodox; Evangelicals; ecology; creation care; leadership; Russia; Ukraine



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## 1. Introduction

Religion is connected with ecology. This is widely accepted by scholars of religious studies (Gottlieb 2006). Grim and Tucker (2014), the editors of the Harvard book series *“Religions of the World and Ecology”*, argued that religions provide for people the basic interpretive stories of who humans are and what their nature is, where humans have come from, and where they are going. Religions suggest to humans how they should treat other humans and how they should relate to nature.

Eco-theology, creation care, and environmental leadership are noteworthy themes for the world's three major Christian traditions—Roman Catholicism, Orthodox Christianity, and Protestantism (Blanchard 2014; Chryssavgis 2013; Hessel and Ruether 2007; Jenkins 2008; Schaefer 2011). O'Brien (2010) stressed that the well-being of people and a balanced biodiversity on the earth is a point of intersection between Christian faith and ethics, social justice and environmentalism, science and politics, and global problems and local solutions.

In recent decades, many leaders and theologians of various Christian traditions have met to address the growing ecological challenges on the earth. While they might disagree on various Christian dogmas, they concurred in saying that “the Christian community has a special obligation to provide moral leadership and an example of caring service to people and to all God's creation” (Oxford Declaration on Global Warming 2002). The international participants of the Lausanne Global Consultation on Creation Care lately agreed that ecology is “a gospel issue within the lordship of Christ”. The consultation's declaration—A Jamaica Call for Actions (Creation Care and the Gospel: Jamaica Call to

[Action 2012](#))—stated, “Many of the world’s poorest people, ecosystems, and species of flora and fauna are being devastated by violence against the environment in multiple ways . . . . We can no longer afford complacency and endless debate. Love for God, our neighbors . . . and the wider creation, as well as our passion for justice, compel us to ‘urgent and prophetic ecological responsibility’”.

Orthodox Christianity and Protestantism are well represented in Russia and Ukraine. Many people in these countries identify themselves as Christians and view religion as an important part of their lives. Russian and Ukrainian Orthodox and Evangelical churches are somewhat concerned with ecological problems in the world. While church leaders note that an ecological theme is not the most important for the Church today, they will argue that this theme should not be neglected as unimportant. Thus, they periodically encourage their believers to safeguard the integrity of God’s creation by sustaining and renewing the life of the earth.

Both Evangelical and Orthodox Christians in Russia and Ukraine periodically convene conversations around ecology and faith<sup>1</sup>. For example, the leaders of the Russian and Ukrainian Orthodox churches authorized an annual day of prayer for the environment ([Epiphanius 2019](#); [JMHS 2015](#)). Their clergies are encouraged to preach on this day, the first of September, about Christian ecological stances and remind their parishioners that the natural environment is the spiritual responsibility of Orthodox believers ([JMHS 2015](#)). Although Russian and Ukrainian Evangelicals occasionally talk about protecting, restoring, and rightly sharing God’s Creation, they have not commenced in their churches a day of prayer for the environment, and do not urge preaching around faith and ecology.

Despite a vast interest among scholars to investigate the religious perspectives and practices among the Orthodox and Evangelicals, to this point no attention has been given to compare their perspectives on the issues of eco-theology, creation care, and environmental leadership. Thus, this article is bridging a gap in scholarly literature and offers the impetus for further studies. The goal of this article is to present the results of analysis of research interviews with 101 Evangelicals (Baptist, Pentecostal, and Charismatic) and 50 Orthodox Christians from Russia and Ukraine. Open-ended questions were used to gather and compare theological and practical perspectives related to ecology and Christianity. We argue that Evangelical and Orthodox churches in Ukraine and Russia can learn from each other and impact their communities: engage minds, touch hearts, feed souls, and respond to environmental challenges as an expression of their faith.

From a theoretical point of view this study relates to several theoretical paradigms. For example, it illuminates some of the assumptions of social constructionist theoretical ideas which postulate that environmental claims are produced by different forms of social construction. Environmental constructionist sociology argues that the existence and force of social constructs determine the acknowledgment of ecological problems and search for environmental solutions. A good discussion about social construction of environmental issues and problems is presented by [Hannigan \(2014\)](#). Our research shows that the eco-theology and environmental leadership of Christians in Russia and Ukraine is tied to what environmental sociologists call the “constructionist–realist” debate.

This study contributes to theoretical debate within missiology and practical theology. It could be used, for example, as a case study that stimulates the advancement of an ecologically grounded Christian practical theology. For practical theologians (especially in Russia and Ukraine), it is important to advance a theological, eschatological, and ecological anthropology that is undeniably needed in the midst of the current global ecological crisis. Such an anthropology, in the words of Jennifer Ayres, “should necessitate a willingness to live in and for our unfinished world” ([Ayres 2017](#), p. 60).

## 2. Background for This Study

### 2.1. Global and Local Assessments of Ecology

It can be said that environmental concerns have both global and local contexts. The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES)

recently completed a massive assessment of global ecology and found that nature and its vital contributions to people, which together embody biodiversity and ecosystem functions and services, were deteriorating worldwide and declining more rapidly than ever (IPBES 2019). In 2020, the Russian Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment published a local environmental assessment relative to the Russian Federation. This report pointed to various problems related to biodiversity and ecosystems within the Russian Federation (Russian State Report 2020). The alarm about the unhealthy local ecology was also articulated by Ukrainian authorities (Ukrainian National Report 2018).

The Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VCIOM) and Institute of Social Research conducted sociological research on the environmental issues in modern Russia (Analytical Review: Environmental Agenda 2020). The study noted that 30% of adult Russians said the environmental situation in Russia was very bad. According to 53% of Russians, the local ecology had deteriorated in the previous 2–3 years. At the same time, 40% of adult Russians believed that the problem of ecological crisis and global warming was overblown and exaggerated. This was shown by VSIOM's survey of 1600 Russians aged 18 and older (Climate Change and How to Fight It 2020).

The health of the planet is the common concern of humankind. Nowadays, it is often acknowledged by intergovernmental agencies, local governmental institutions, and civil organizations of all kinds and sizes. Ostap Semerak, a Ukrainian politician and former Minister of Ecology, recently pointed out that the development and conservation of biological diversity was a worthy cause for which Ukrainian society, together with the church and authorities, must unite (News Report 2017).

## 2.2. Orthodox Christianity and Evangelicalism in Russia and Ukraine

In the history of Russia and Ukraine, Orthodox Christianity and Evangelicalism each have their own historical developments (Baron and Kollmann 1997; Magocsi 2010; Nikol'skaya 2009; Pospelovsky 1998; Ratajeski 2014; Riasanovsky and Steinberg 2019). In the past and in our time, the Russian and Ukrainian Evangelicals and Orthodox play their roles in the ongoing arduous social and political life of their countries (Clark and Vovk 2020; Krawchuk and Bremer 2017; Metreveli 2020; Papkova 2011; Richters 2013; Shestopalets 2019). Several recent publications revealed their achievements and/or failures (for example, see Kazmina and Filippova 2005; Lyubashchenko 2010).

There exists vast literature about Evangelicals and Orthodox in Russia and Ukraine. The religious, historical, and sociocultural connections between these Christian traditions and their communities can be traced in various discourses: biblical interpretation (Negrov 2006, 2008; Likhoshesterov 2013); mission of the Church (Kochetkov 2002; Sawatsky 2004; Ubeivolc 2016); and theological teachings (Fiddes and Songulashvili 2013; Puzyrin 2011). Occasionally, scholars compare the Orthodox and Evangelicals through various lenses. For example, in a recent article, Elena Prutskova (2021) presented the analysis of two surveys that aimed to measure religiosity among different Christian groups in Russia. She concluded that the level of religiosity among the Russian Orthodox parishioners is slightly lower than representatives of the Evangelical Protestants in Russia.

There should not be an assumption that there are no differences among the Evangelicals and that the Russian and the Ukrainian Orthodox churches are identical in their theological and ideological ways. For example, it should be noted that the new Orthodox Church of Ukraine recently received autocephaly and is partially recognized by autocephalous Orthodox Churches (the reasons for Ukrainian Orthodox autocephaly are well articulated by Cyril Hovorun (2020a)). Yet, there is disapproval toward this church from the Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) in Ukraine. The messianic discourse ideology is widespread in contemporary Russia (Kushnir 2019). The so-called concept of symphonia of church–state relationships when the Orthodox Christianity becomes political religion (Hovorun 2018) is appropriate to the Orthodox Church in the Russian Federation. Cyril Hovorun (2020b), however, points out that in the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, there is

a desire for a “symphony” with civil society, instead of a traditional symphonic relationship with the state.

### 3. Method

The inquiry results presented in this article were based on qualitative research that was characterized by gathering multiple forms of data such as interviews, focus groups and documents, rather than relying on a single data source. The main source of data was collected in individual interviews and focus groups. This information was complemented by the analysis of relevant Orthodox and Evangelical documents and literature.

The methodology of qualitative investigation is systematically reviewed by academicians (Creswell and Poth 2018; Gubrium and Holstein 2002; King and Horrocks 2010; Tracy 2020). Analysis of documents and research interviewing are a very well accepted approach in qualitative research (King and Horrocks 2010; Creswell and Poth 2018). It is also commonly accepted that the methodology of qualitative study has an evolving design rather than a tightly prefigured design. Hatch (2002), Marshall and Rossman (2010), and Creswell and Poth (2018) indicate that qualitative inquiry has several vital characteristics. For example: (1) it focuses on general participants’ perspectives, their meanings, and their multiple subjective views; and (2) the process of designing a qualitative study emerges during inquiry (e.g., the size of the sample and/or list of questions may eventually evolve), etc.

This study does not analyze how the eco-theological ideas and practices of environmental leadership depend on specific factors such as micro ecclesiastic/doctrinal identities among Orthodox or Evangelicals, geographical locations, residential patterns (urban, nonurban), marriage status, education level, age, or other demographics. Our analysis of interview and focus-group materials epitomizes what Creswell (2013) names to be a holistic account of qualitative inquiry. According to Creswell, qualitative researchers try to develop a complex broad sketch under study. They later report the larger picture that emerges and are not bound by the analysis of tight relationships among micro factors. Rather, the researchers identify the complex interactions of factors in general context (Creswell 2013, p. 47). Therefore, the current study focuses on general tendencies in eco-theological thinking and practices of environmental leadership among Evangelical and Orthodox Christians in Russia and Ukraine. This study investigates the larger picture that allows further research projects to dive into the analysis of links and/or cause-and-effect relationships among other significant factors.

#### 3.1. Questions and Sampling of Individual Interviews/Focus Group

This study comprised face-to-face and online (Zoom, telephone) qualitative research interviewing of 151 participants from Orthodox and Evangelical religious communities in Russia and Ukraine. Following is the list of interview and focus-group questions:

1. What value does nature and animals have for humans and for you personally?
2. What can you say about the ecological situation in the country, in the world?
3. How do you feel about what is called the modern environmental crisis?
4. What can you say about the attitude of contemporary Christians towards nature and the environment?
5. How do you understand the idea of creation care?
6. Can you share what you personally do to care for creation?
7. Knowing that you are familiar with the Bible, can you tell what it says about nature and the animals?

After a random selection of first respondents, a snowball sampling strategy was used to identify other potential subjects. A snowball sampling strategy utilizes the help of research participants to recruit additional research subjects (Patton 2009; Tracy 2020). Participants were asked to encourage others to come forward for interview. When new individuals were named, the researchers used a “cold-calling” technique, contacting the

individual out of the blue. Some participants were recruited by researchers via social-media networking platforms such as Facebook and VKontakte.

We interviewed 50 Orthodox (10 females and 40 males; 44 from Ukraine and 6 from Russia) and 101 Evangelical (33 females and 68 males; 62 from Russia and 39 from Ukraine) Christians. Twelve focus groups were organized with the participation of the Russian and Ukrainian Evangelicals.

It is important to explain the different sample sizes among the Evangelicals and Orthodox. The Evangelical Christians (individually or in groups) were interviewed before enforced social distancing and lockdown related to COVID-19. Various restrictions related to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) blocked a possibility to interview groups of Orthodox Christians. Thus, as stated above, the researchers recruited the Orthodox believers only for individual interviews.

The inclusion criteria for the study were men and women who were:

- Religious practitioners—active members of Evangelical or Orthodox churches;
- Aged 18 years and above; and
- Lived in Russia or Ukraine.

The sample for this study was chosen to represent a diversity of Christians' gender, church status (priests, deacons, laity), and location (urban, rural, suburban). It should be noted, however, that the controversial and novel subject of the research significantly hampered the research process. In our experience, many Orthodox believers were quite reluctant to be interviewed compared to the Evangelicals. In addition, while the interviews were conducted both in the form of direct and telephone conversations, they happened in the context of the still-prevailing coronavirus pandemic in Russia and Ukraine. Thus, certain restrictions and limitations have resulted from it.

Notice that, despite our commitment to having an equal proportion of respondents from Ukraine and Russia, Orthodox Christians from Russia were less open to participate in the research. The following response to the interview invitation serves as an example of this tendency: *"I am the Church's bureaucrat. Talk to laity. I personally don't mind, but you should have an official request for the right to interview me. It's not easy to interview me"*. Another potential Orthodox respondent from Russia declined to be interviewed and replied as follows: *"Imagine that today is the Fall of 1941 and you are conducting this research . . . . Given the conditions of the ongoing war against humanity (literally there is World War III, 'Covid-fascism') the problems of your research topic are less relevant, unfortunately"*.

### 3.2. Data Collection and Analysis

The researchers asked participants the open-ended questions (listed above), which helped stimulate thought among interviewees and encouraged them to express their views without inhibition, fear of interviewer bias, or unnecessary limitations (Creswell and Poth 2018; Tracy 2020). The interviews were recorded, and they were transcribed either in Russian or Ukrainian languages. After analyzing the transcripts of all individual and group interviews using MAXQDA qualitative data analysis software, we compared Evangelical and Orthodox perspectives on environmental leadership (creation care) and eco-theology.

In the process of interpretation of the data, we were able to establish "themes", "categories", or "concepts" that were embedded in the data. The interpretation of the answers of our respondents allowed us to establish hierarchical codes; i.e., "umbrella" categories that made conceptual sense. In our research, we followed the coding techniques suggested by Saldaña (2016).

### 3.3. Limitations

Our document analysis, as a form of qualitative research, focuses on the selected official Orthodox and Evangelical documents and specialized literature. This is an exemplary rather than an exhaustive document analysis. Moreover, no analysis has been performed to interpret the public records (the official, ongoing news of Churches' activities, annual reports, etc.), personal documents of Evangelical or Orthodox believers (accounts of an indi-

vidual's convictions and actions expressed via e-mails, Facebook posts, reflections/journals, etc.), and/or artifacts (flyers, posters, printed educational materials, etc.).

The current study focuses on general tendencies in eco-theological thinking and practices of environmental leadership among Evangelical and Orthodox Christians in Russia and Ukraine. It does not analyze how these ideas and practices depend on specific micro factors (doctrinal/canonical identities, geographical locations, residential patterns (urban, nonurban), marriage status, education level, age, or other demographics). Such analysis was beyond the scope of this study.

The current study also does not represent a longitudinal analysis of eco-theology and environmental leadership among Russian and Ukrainian Christians. Since there has been no previous study done on this topic, it was not possible to make such an analysis. However, future research undertakings ought to investigate how eco-theological perspectives and practices of environmental responsibility will be changed among both Evangelicals and Orthodox. Further studies can identify, analyze, and explain similarities and differences in eco-theology and environmental leadership among the Evangelical and Orthodox Christians in Russia and Ukraine by paying attention to specific Church categorizations and sociodemographic profiles.

#### 4. Analysis and Findings

##### 4.1. Review of Relevant Documents and Specialized Literature

What is the ecological agenda of Evangelicals and Orthodox? Official documents produced by Russian and Ukrainian Church leaders shed some light on their positions on various ecological and environmental issues (see [BSCROC 2000](#); [PROC on Current Environmental Problems 2013](#); [RPECU 2018](#); [SCRUEB 2014](#); [SPPCR 2014](#)). In admonishing Christians to care for ecology, Russian Baptists, for example, appealed to the authority of the Bible and legislation of the Russian Federation ([SCRUEB 2014](#)). The Orthodox Church substantiated its attention to environment on the basis of Holy Scripture and Holy Tradition, with special reference to Church Fathers such as Maximus the Confessor, John Chrysostom, and Gregory of Nyssa ([BSCROC 2000](#)).

The Evangelicals and Orthodox agreed that all creation came from God, the Lord of all creation and the Chief Inspiration, to care for biodiversity and ecosystem on the planet. They also agreed that the so-called ecological crisis was created by man. It was essentially a moral issue, profoundly personal and spiritual ([BSCRACEFP 2002](#); [BSCROC 2000](#); [Mumrikov 2013](#); [RPECU 2018](#); [SCRUEB 2014](#); [SPPCR 2014](#)). Thus, "The answers to many questions caused by the environmental crisis lie in the human soul, not in the spheres of economics, biology, technologies, or politics" ([BSCRACEFP 2002](#)).

Orthodox documents placed the ecological theme in the context of discussion of humans' dignity, freedom, and rights. "The realization of human rights should not lead to the degradation of the environment and depletion of natural resources" ([ROCBTHDFR 2008](#)). The Orthodox sources suggested that the Orthodox Church operates with corporate, public categories such as civilization, culture, and values, whereas Evangelicals were more focused on individual aspects of creation care, including personal responsibility of the believers and Christians' understanding of the biblical teaching on this theme (see [RPECU 2018](#); [SPPCR 2014](#)).

While admitting that the root of the problem is in humans' hearts, a document of the Russian Orthodox Church criticized modern civilization in its preoccupation with luxurious lifestyle, enrichment, comfort, and consumerism ([BSCROC 2000](#)). Orthodox officials taught that the real and most effective alternative to consumerism is a Christian lifestyle based on moderation, sobriety, responsibility, refusal of excesses/luxuries, respect for the needs of other people and creatures, and understanding of spiritual values ([PROC on Current Environmental Problems 2013](#)). Similar accents were made by the Evangelicals ([BSCRACEFP 2002](#)).

Besides official Orthodox documents that outlined Christian ideas about ecology, a small number of contemporary Orthodox and Evangelical theologians and thinkers in

Russia and Ukraine spoke about it in their writings. Orthodox authors stressed that the solution to various ecological issues is rooted in the spiritual transformation of people (Bokotey et al. 2016; Schlenov and Petruschina 1999). Some conceptualized the issues of “Christianity and ecology” in connection with the Orthodox Ecclesiastic dogmatics (Ivanov 1990) or liturgy (Goricheva 2010; Khoruzhii 2014). It was strongly suggested that there is a conceptual link between ecology and Orthodox religious asceticism (Khoruzhii 2016).

Ryzhov (2013), a Russian evangelical psychologist and educator, argued that Christians must strengthen their ecological thinking and learn from a broader historical intellectual tradition of Protestant Reformation. Meleshko (2019), an evangelical theologian from Ukraine, even attempted to initiate the interfaith theological dialogue. As an Evangelical theologian and pastor, he paid attention to Eastern Orthodox theologians Alexander Schmemmann and Dumitru Stăniloae to validate the point that all Christians should be responsible for creation care.

Specialized solid literature on Christian eco-theology and environmental leadership written by contemporary Russian and Ukrainian Evangelicals is almost absent. Meleshko explained this by stating, “Typically, in the perception of Evangelicals, care for the environment and worship of God are hardly linked into a coherent whole” (Meleshko 2013, p. 91). Thus, it is quite remarkable that the official document of the Russian Union of Evangelical Christian-Baptists stated that that Russian Baptists “consider the development of ecological theology as one of their social tasks aimed to fight ignorance and indifferent attitude that causes significant and often irreversible damage to the earthly environment that determines our lives and well-being” (SCRUEB 2014).

Some recent publications on eco-theology demonstrated that this is new for many Orthodox and Evangelicals. There were some attempts to develop eco-theology with a narrow confessional and even patriotic approach. For example, Alexander Evdokimov (2018), a Russian Orthodox professor in the department of theology at Moscow State Linguistic University, proposed quite a radical approach. He argued that the Orthodox eco-theological thinking must be based solely on the teaching of the Church and be autonomous from the influence of other Church traditions. In his view, non-Russian and non-Orthodox eco-theologians were developing an academic discipline that contributed little to the solution of environmental problems. Such non-Orthodox eco-theology did not help Orthodox Christians be more ethical and effective in their environmental responsibility (Evdokimov 2018, p. 420). In his view, there was no doubt that “Russia is the guarantor of spiritual and ecological balance on the planet” (Evdokimov 2012, p. 631). He believed that Russia was a spiritual leader in the world and that Orthodox Christianity was a proper ideology for the Russian state. He also recognized that the Russian Orthodox Church was a powerful symbol and instrument of contemporary Russian statehood and culture. It was quite obvious that the Russian Orthodox Church and state leaders often promoted the ancient Byzantine symphonic ideal, under which a strong cooperation between the Church and state is ideologically desirable (Knox 2003). Evdokimov’s orthodox ecclesiastical ecological conciseness (Evdokimov 2012) presupposed that cooperation between the Church and state would benefit not only Russia, but the entire planet. He spoke in accord with Vishnyakov and Kisileva (2017), who argued Russia was a global spiritual leader, and to strengthen that position required the development and implementation of the new Russian ideology of the XXI century. They saw that this new Russian national ideology must be rooted in the ideological and ethical aspects of national ecologic conciseness. Evdokimov (2012) argued that the Orthodox ecological perspective should be taken as a national ideology and that this ideology would empower Russia to save the world.

#### 4.2. Analysis and Findings from Interviews and Focus Groups

In the following paragraphs, we present and discuss the results of comparative analysis of the perspectives communicated in this research by Russian and Ukrainian Orthodox and Evangelical Christians.

The participants were asked to respond to seven research questions, and they could express their thoughts in more than one way. Thus, the total number of shared perspectives (responses) is not necessarily equal to the total number of participants. In our analysis, we compared the views of Evangelicals and Orthodox participants by paying attention to “themes”, “categories”, and “senses” evolved from interviews, and by calculating the percentage (weight) that each perspective (theme) received.

#### 4.2.1. The Value of Nature and Animals

Effective and ethical environmental leadership presupposes that people place a high value on a balanced ecosystem (Clatworthy 1997; Helm 2016). So, the first question in this research interview—“What value does nature and animals have for humans and for you personally?”—was intended to show how Orthodox and Evangelicals understood the value of nature and animals. In general, Christians of both traditions fundamentally shared the belief that the main value of nature and animals was as a resource for satisfying the biological needs of humankind. This emphasis was made 21 times by Evangelicals (21% of total Evangelical responses) and 12 times by Orthodox participants (19% of total Orthodox responses). For example, one Evangelical interviewee said, *“The role of animals is to be our transport (like donkeys, horses), be our ‘living canned food,’ be materials for experiments. But animals haven’t been promised eternal life. They don’t have the ‘superstructure’ of the human spirit”*. An Orthodox priest put it similarly, *“Nature was created for humans. Sun, sea, water, air, the earth that feeds the whole population of the planet,—these are the exceptional providence of God for a human”*.

Some respondents said that nature’s highest value is displayed in its inherent harmony, interdependence, and interconnectedness. This was emphasized 19 times by Evangelicals (19% of their responses) and 19 times by Orthodox (30% of their responses). Thus, ecological responsibility had to be directed toward all species of flora and fauna. Nothing could be excluded from care without causing harm and posing risks to the rest of God’s creation. As one Orthodox interviewee said, *“The world is interrelated. If we stop being responsible for the environment, something (or not some, but many things) will lose its value, which will lead to the devaluation of other things. Everything is interrelated”*.

Orthodox respondents noted four times that humans get to know and realize themselves due to nature and animals. In other words, an individual could not think of himself or herself in isolation from the rest of creation. This approach was enlightened in the following quote, *“Animals are life forms beside which a man can understand his peculiarity in God’s eyes”*. Consequently, not only was creation interrelated at the biological level, but also at the ontological one. Notice that this idea was completely absent in the responses of Evangelicals, which could reveal either or both their anthropocentric biases.

Evangelical and Orthodox Christians agreed in belief that God invited humans to be good stewards and coworkers with God in caring for creation. Thus, God’s command to be stewards; i.e., to care for, watch over, cultivate, govern, and/or improve the earth “on behalf of God”, was a great privilege. The idea was stressed three times by Evangelicals (12% of responses) and eight times by Orthodox (12.7% of responses). One Orthodox interviewee stated that, *“God could have created the whole nature, our Earth, in such a way that people shouldn’t cultivate it . . . . But God commanded this task to us. If we look from this point of view, then nature should be very valuable to us”*.

Some respondents argued that nature and animals are valuable simply because they are created by God (theocentric value). This emphasis was made nine times by Evangelicals (9% of responses) and 12 times by Orthodox (19% of responses). For example, an Orthodox interviewee noted that, *“All creation has great value because, if God created it, then from the perspective of God, everything that He created is valuable”*.



#### 4.2.2. Perspectives on the Ecological Situation

In our study, Orthodox and Evangelical Christians were asked to share their thoughts about the ecological situation in their country and in the world (research question #2), and how they felt about what is called the modern environmental crisis (question #3).

The vast majority of Evangelical and Orthodox Christians acknowledged the credibility and urgency of the ecological crisis. Evangelicals emphasized this 67 times (69.1% of all Evangelical responses) and Orthodox respondents 35 times (68.6% of Orthodox responses). To describe and characterize the ecological situation in their country and the world, respondents used words such as lamentable, catastrophic, dreadful, and critical. Ecological problems mentioned by the respondents were deforestation, climate change, global warming, the greenhouse effect, air pollution, contamination of water resources, contamination by radiation, and loss of biodiversity. One Evangelical interviewee said, *“Our ecology is rolling down and down, and I feel like in the near future our planet will turn into one big catastrophe where life is impossible”*.

Responding to question #3—“How do you feel about what is called the modern environmental crisis?”—four participants responded more in theological terms. Three Orthodox priests noted that ecological crisis should be interpreted through the meaning of the Greek word “κρίσις” (judgement). One of them stated, *“Ecological crisis, judgment in the ecological sphere, is God’s judgment upon us for the misuse of God’s creation . . . . We should care for creation and not exploit it, not squeeze it like a lemon”*. An Evangelical interviewee also linked the environmental crisis and the theme of God’s judgement by saying, *“Ecological crisis is the consequence of the Fall. God intended humans—as the pinnacle of creation—to own it all, to wisely steward it. Sin has distorted the ecological system . . . . I think that it is impossible to solve this ecological problem without a return to God, regeneration, and salvation”*.

This research showed that some Orthodox and Evangelicals in Russia and Ukraine believed that the problem of ecological crisis was overestimated. This point was made 11 times by Evangelicals (11.3% of responses) and eight times by Orthodox (15.7% of responses). For example, an Evangelical respondent said, *“I don’t think that we have reached a crisis point yet. For the last 50–60 years, people have shouted that the crisis has come or is about to come very soon, or that we live amidst it . . . . I haven’t experienced it firsthand nor do I have any fears”*.

In addition, some Evangelical and Orthodox respondents were unsure whether the ecological crisis was real and whether Christians should be concerned about it. This was emphasized 10 times by Evangelicals (10.3%) and six times by the Orthodox (11.8%). Therefore, there were people among both Evangelical and Orthodox communities who either denied or doubted the credibility of the ecological crisis.

A small number of participants thought that the problem of ecological crisis was overestimated by politicians, media, and climate activists. They expressed personal negative attitudes toward the theme of ecological crisis and ecological responsibility in general. Such an attitude was expressed by 9.3% of Evangelical interviewees and by 4% of the Orthodox. For example, one Orthodox interviewee said, *“Some people use the topic of the ecological crisis for self-promotion. Just take this movement of Greta Thunberg . . . . It looks like self-promotion . . . but there are no specific actions”*.

#### 4.2.3. The Attitude of Contemporary Christians toward Nature and Environment

Lynn White Jr., in his well-known article “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis” (White 1967), argued that ecological crisis is the result of Western Christianity’s anthropocentrism in combination with the 19th-century synthesis of science and technology (see also Whitney 2015). In the West, this critique of Christianity prompted many to respond to White’s thesis, which eventually led to the development of Christian eco-theology (Kerns 2004, p. 466). Although many theologians have demonstrated that Judeo-Christian Scriptures do not support exploitation of natural resources (Bauckham 2011; Moo and Moo 2018), it is not always clear whether Christians have positive and responsible attitudes toward nature and the environment. Thus, in this research participants were asked

(question #4) how they perceived the attitude of contemporary Christians (particularly in Russia and Ukraine) to nature and the environment.

Some respondents argued that the attitude of contemporary Christians to nature and environment is basically positive. This emphasis was made 21 times by Evangelicals (28.05% of Evangelical responses) and 11 times by Orthodox (26.19% of Orthodox responses). For example, an Evangelical interviewee said, *“I think that a religious person treats nature with care. At least so in my circle that I know the best. Because, when God is inside, in the heart and mind, then we have the right attitude toward things around us, our environment”*. Similar responses were made by the Orthodox, but many of them demarcated the official position of the Church from the approach of individual believers. For example, an Orthodox interviewee noted, *“We should realize that there is an official position of the Church . . . but there are also billions of people who associate themselves with religion. The official position of the Church is basically pro-environmental, it insists on responsible consumption, it criticizes the ideology of consumerism. But people often behave in a different way”*. Such an apparent tension between the official position of the Church and the praxis of individual members of the Church has not been stressed by Evangelical respondents. Perhaps it is somewhat difficult for Evangelicals to talk about an official position of the Church due to a local church autonomy concept that is shared by the majority of Evangelicals in Ukraine and Russia. They can talk only about a personal view and the attitude of individual Christians to the environment, whereas Orthodox Christians tend to evaluate the attitude of contemporary Christians based on the official position of the Church (documents, decisions of councils, doctrinal statements, works of the Apostolic Fathers, etc.).

Evangelicals are inclined to evaluate the attitude of contemporary Christians to the environment as indifferent to a much greater extent than Orthodox Christians. Such an attitude was emphasized 20 times by Evangelical interviewees (24.39% of responses) and only once by an Orthodox interviewee. Here are examples of the statements:

*“Christians mainly deal with spiritual matters like the Gospel and saving people. But as for the environment—I haven’t noticed that the Church pays much attention to this”*. (Evangelical)

*“Most Christians, 90% of them, don’t think that ecological problems have relevance to Christianity and the spiritual sphere. Even 95% of them don’t think about it”*. (Evangelical)

*“I haven’t heard that this question was ever raised in the Churches. We, I think, are not ready for it yet”*. (Evangelical)

*“I think that Christians have many other concerns. First of all, caring for the ecology of their souls”*. (Orthodox)

Some respondents argued that Christians in general have a negative attitude toward nature and the environment. Evangelicals made this emphasis 17 times (20.73% of responses) and Orthodox participants 15 times (35.71% of responses). One Orthodox priest stated that, *“Christians in the former Soviet Union don’t think about it”*. An Evangelical interviewee linked this fact with theology of Russian and Ukrainian Evangelicals, *“Contemporary Christians in Russia don’t have an attitude about the environment and nature because this issue is in the area of theology”*. Another Evangelical interviewee shared this view, *“I think that the theological paradigm, a worldview of Christians, implies that our main goal is to wait for Christ; that God is only in the Church, whereas the rest is about to fold and burn, which leads to the conclusion that—want it or not—nothing on earth has meaning”*. Therefore, certain theological beliefs enhance the negative attitude of some Christians in Russia and Ukraine.

A noticeable number of interviewees said that Christians have the same attitude toward nature and environment as non-Christians. This was stressed 12 times by Evangelicals (14.6%) and four times by Orthodox (9.5%). This is how an Orthodox interviewee put it: *“I think that the attitude of Christians is the same as the attitude of non-Christians. If people are concerned with an ecological agenda, it is only because they are concerned with that ecological*

*agenda, not because they are Christians. Theology is a secondary factor that should either affirm or deny their point of view”.*

It is quite interesting that 12% of Evangelical and 26% of Orthodox participants were not able to comment on the attitude of other Christians toward nature and environment. Some were reluctant to comment on what other people think or do. Others acknowledged that they simply do not know. This research also revealed that Evangelical and Orthodox Christians in Russia and Ukraine know very little about specific ongoing local or global interfaith dialogues and initiatives related to creation care.

#### 4.2.4. Perspectives on the Concept of Creation Care

Participants were asked about their understanding of the concept of creation care in research question #5. In many Christian circles today, creation care is understood as Christians’ response to the Gospel as a part of the Christian proclamation of Good News ([Creation Care and the Gospel: Jamaica Call to Action 2012](#)).

Most interviewees asserted that creation care should be demonstrated in active work to protect and conserve the environment such as tree planting, sorting waste, making a personal contribution to the conservation of the environment, animal welfare, or education of other people to care for creation. This was accentuated 37 times by Evangelical (60.66% of their responses) and 10 times by Orthodox (25% of their responses) interviewees. Examples include:

*“To care about what is around us. Birds, animals, water, ground, etc”.* (Orthodox)

*“For me personally, care for the Earth is when you give something, not only receive”.* (Orthodox)

*“Creation care begins with us, yet we also should make some impact to motivate other people”.* (Evangelical)

Some Evangelical and Orthodox Christians shared the belief that the idea of creation care consisted in not harming nature, or passive care for creation (“don’t harm”, “don’t litter”, “don’t kill”, etc.). Such belief was noted 19 times by Evangelicals (31.15%) and six times by Orthodox (15%). According to one Evangelical interviewee, *“Care for creation begins when we are not harming nature. This is caring—when I personally don’t harm nature. When I go camping, I always take garbage bags with me to clean up after myself. This protects nature. I don’t do unlawful things to nature, like felling trees”.* Per the research, Evangelicals were more inclined to understand creation care in terms of passive activity; i.e., not doing anything that harms.

A good number of Orthodox interviewees understood creation care as environmental stewardship considering the Creator’s command to care for creation. Although some Evangelicals were aware of the theological interpretation of creation care, this category weighed stronger in the answers of the Orthodox interviewees. Orthodox participants emphasized this 24 times (60% of responses), whereas only five times was this emphasis made by Evangelicals (8.20% of responses). Following are several examples:

*“The Lord says: ‘Cultivate the paradise.’ What does it mean? To take care of it, not simply benefit from it”.* (Orthodox)

*“Care of creation is God’s command, and we have to take this responsibility before God. We should do everything to help creation fulfill the plan of our Creator”.* (Orthodox)

*“This is the biblical truth that God initially gave to Adam when he placed him in the garden of Eden. He gave him the command to not only be fruitful and multiply . . . but also to take care, improve, cultivate. Cultivation has to do with improvement. After all, it is about caring for the place where God put us”.* (Evangelical)

Although Evangelical and Orthodox Christians understood creation care in similar terms, their responses contained different emphases—Orthodox Christians tended to emphasize theological aspects of creation care, whereas Evangelical Christians focused on active forms of work to protect the environment.

#### 4.2.5. Personal Environmental Leadership

Research question #6 asked respondents to share how they personally cared for creation. The aim of this question was to identify whether and how the respondents practiced environmental leadership and, thus, implemented what they believed concerning the idea of creation care.

Some interviewees indicated that they tried to not harm nature by their work and daily routine activities. This was emphasized by 56% of Evangelicals (of 101 interviewees) and by 25% of Orthodox (of 50 interviewees). For example, an Orthodox interviewee said, *“First and foremost, I start with myself. I try to not litter outdoors when camping”*. A similar response was made by an Evangelical respondent: *“When our church organizes outdoor camp, we always leave that place clean after we finish. A forest ranger once told us, ‘Your camp has 200 people, but when you leave, it is cleaner than after 2–3 other people that come’”*.

Some respondents said that they actively care for creation: tree planting; sorting waste; growing or buying natural, eco-friendly, anti-pollutant plants; caring for animals; or engaging in agriculture (planting a vegetable garden). This trajectory was taken by 27% of Evangelicals and 32% of Orthodox participants. A few participants mentioned that they volunteer for projects related to environmental conservation and animal welfare (2% Evangelicals and 10% Orthodox). It is important to note that activism, as the expression and demonstration of the gospel in missionary and social reform efforts, is one of the four primary characteristics of evangelicalism (Bebbington 1989).

The research showed that there was some inconsistency in the responses of Evangelicals. While many of them stated that creation care for Christians meant to be personally involved in it (sorting waste, tree planting, etc.), speaking about their personal engagement in care for creation, 56% of Evangelicals admitted that they cared for creation only in passive forms. Less than half of Evangelicals practiced what they believed.

Some respondents shared that personal environmental leadership could be accomplished through education, parenting, preaching, leading by example, and everything that influences people to care for creation. Four percent of Evangelicals and 27% of Orthodox interviewees stated this point. Strikingly, a significant portion of Orthodox interviewees stressed that their responsibility was not only to act alone, but also to inform, convince, inspire, and involve other people in creation care. Here are two statements that represented their position:

*“From my position as a teacher, philosopher, Christian . . . I try to contribute to the public discourse the following idea: if I think in Christian categories, it should be natural for me to think in categories of care for the environment”*. (Orthodox)

*“As a priest, I regularly say in my sermon that a person’s lifestyle and attitude toward nature is the evidence of what is in his or her soul”*. (Orthodox)

#### 4.2.6. Eco-Faith and Eco-Hermeneutics

To what extent do Evangelical and Orthodox Christians in Russia and Ukraine connect ecological themes with their sources of their faith? What ecological hermeneutical strategies do they use? These enquiries were behind the seventh research question that we asked our participants; i.e., what the Bible says concerning nature and animals (question #7). The researchers were open to hearing the ecological perspectives of the interviewees based on other religious sources important to their faith tradition. The analysis of the responses helped to identify six features in the eco-theological and eco-hermeneutical landscape: (1) theology of Creation and creation care; (2) ecological sin; (3) eco-theology in the Old Testament; (4) eco-theology in Jesus and the Gospels; (5) eco-eschatology; and (6) Bible, tradition, and eco-hermeneutics.

##### Theology of Creation and Creation Care

Most participants stated that the first two chapters of Genesis say a lot about nature and animals. This was noted by 46% of Orthodox participants and 40% of Evangelicals. Some added that God commanded people to care for creation when he created the world.

Four Orthodox interviewees linked the Genesis creation narrative with the Eastern Orthodox doctrine of theosis/deification (on both personal and cosmic levels) by using the theory of evolution as a bridge between the two. In their perspective, Christians should engage in active care for creation because personal transformation of believers is inseparable from the ultimate transformation of the universe. For example, an Orthodox priest from Ukraine said:

*“When a human-like creature came to the realization that it was no longer an animal but was similar to God and began searching for God, at that moment we read their names mentioned in the second chapter of Genesis . . . . Only those people who realized their intelligence, who had a choice, have names. If we have separated ourselves and become the pinnacle of creation, then we will always be part of the animal world and part of the Divine world. If a man achieves holiness, he transforms his part of the animal world, inspires it, and thus accomplishes deification. Through this deification the whole animal world will be transformed”.*

A similar idea was expressed by another Orthodox interviewee: *“A man is such a microcosm—through his life, he leads the earth to salvation”.*

### Ecological Sin

The Bible indicates that original sin has negatively affected creation in some ways, yet it is still good and splendid (see Ps. 8; 104) but at the same time corrupted (Gen. 3:17; Rom. 8:22). From a Christian perspective, sin could be understood as structural violence, because it describes different systems of oppression, including ecological destruction (Conradie 2020, pp. 5–6).

Our research showed that Russian and Ukrainian Orthodox and Evangelical Christians did not explicitly express that there was a strong link between the Christian doctrine of original sin and contemporary problems of environmental devastation, environmental injustice, and widespread consumerism. The respondents rarely mentioned original sin (the Fall of man) as a factor that damaged creation. In fact, this was mentioned by only 5% of Evangelical interviewees and 9% of Orthodox participants. One Evangelical respondent said, *“From the moment of our wrongdoing, the ground will produce thorns and thistles”.* Of all 151 participants, there was only one interviewee, a Ukrainian Orthodox priest, who tied the Christian doctrine of original sin with the current ecological crisis. He stated:

*“When the Fall happened, everything turned upside down . . . . Sin changed everything completely (even things that seemed to be under humans’ submission) and came to the world through a man. And that is why everything should be fixed by a man. Because of this, Christ is the new Adam who came to set us free from sin, curse, death. Indeed, he set us free”.*

Thus, in general it is hard to say if the study’s participants would strongly agree with Becker (1992) in the argument that the Christian doctrine of original sin helped clarify Christian understanding of the present ecological crisis (p. 153). It is quite peculiar that in our study only a few respondents mentioned the Christian doctrine of sin. This may suggest that these Christians in Ukraine and Russia tended to separate private religious matters from broader environmental issues and/or their eco-theological conscience operated without interconnecting the doctrine of original sin with the contemporary state of ecology.

### Eco-Theology in the Old Testament

Sometimes, within or outside Christian circles, the opinion is voiced that the Bible is indifferent toward the environment or that environmental ethics are largely absent from the Bible, especially in the Old Testament. These positions were not shared by the participants of this research. The study showed that Ukrainian and Russian Orthodox and Evangelical Christians believed that many Old Testament passages were not indifferent toward the environment and helped to avoid anthropocentrism in the ecological debate.

Speaking about animals and nature in the Bible, the interviewees in this study made references to various Old Testament books (by 28% of Evangelicals and 32% of Orthodox). A number of biblical passages were cited only once either by Evangelical or Orthodox respondents. For example, they mentioned the sun standing still in the book of Joshua (Joshua 10), clothes and diet of the prophet Elijah (2 Kings 1:8), Jonah's being in the belly of a great fish (Jonah 1-2), and the prophet Daniel's sojourn at the bottom of the den of lions (Daniel 6).

Several Old Testament narratives were mentioned by the respondents from both faith traditions. Three Evangelical and three Orthodox interviewees mentioned the Old Testament story of Noah (Genesis 6-9), especially the building of the ark and the Great Flood. For example, an Orthodox interviewee said:

*"I will refer to the story of Noah. The Bible demonstrates that when it comes to salvation, this also implies care for various animals, their salvation, because they live in the same world with humans. This means that the well-being and life of humans is impossible without the lives of other living creatures. We share the same creation and, in a sense, have the same future . . . . The question of the salvation of people touches the issues of how we can preserve and continue the happy and safe existence of other creatures"*.

Another Orthodox respondent stated, *"God loves not only humans but also everything that he created. And Noah built that ship not only for himself as a selfish man, but also for animals that were saved there with him"*.

In total, seven Evangelical and four Orthodox respondents mentioned Old Testament laws and regulations related to nature and animals. One Evangelical interviewee paraphrased Deuteronomy 20:19-20 as, *"When you wage war, don't destroy trees"*. As another example, an Orthodox priest alluded to Leviticus 25 and said, *"The earth is God's property and, according to the Bible, nobody can own it permanently. One can use and cultivate it for a limited period of time. Every seven years people should give the earth rest to be restored"*.

Eight Evangelical and nine Orthodox referred to Psalms and Proverbs that contained ideas related to nature, animals, and creation care. For example, an Evangelical respondent paraphrased the text from Proverbs 12:10: *"The righteous person cares even about cattle"*.

Several Orthodox interviewees argued that liturgical practice has helped them remember certain passages of Scriptures associated with nature and the animal world. One such example was, *"Every evening service in the Orthodox liturgy begins with the reading of Psalm 104 in which David, as a prophet, was very excited and talked about the creation of the world"*.

### Eco-Theology in Jesus and the Gospels

It is noteworthy that not many interviewees in this study linked the themes of nature, creation, and creation care with the person of Jesus Christ and/or referred to the Gospels to express this connection. Only three Evangelicals and nine Orthodox stated this emphasis. All references to Jesus could be divided into two categories: (1) Jesus' interaction with nature; and (2) nature in Jesus's teaching. The following response of an Orthodox interviewee served as an example of this first category: *"In the Gospels, we see how many times the Lord calmed the storm before his disciples"*. An Evangelical interviewee response illustrated the second category: *"Christ gave many examples derived from his observations of Israel's agrarian life . . . . Apparently, God gave the earth to us as an example and object for our observations. Looking at plants and animals, we, among other things, explore the Creator's character"*.

Only one interviewee (from 151 participants in this study)—an Orthodox priest—made a theological connection between creation and the death/resurrection of Jesus: *"Everything had to be restored by man, which is why Christ is the new Adam who came to set us free from sin, curse, and death. And he did it. The Lord himself said it in his sermons"*. Perhaps the fact that only one interviewee mentioned Jesus as savior of the universe suggests that Evangelical and Orthodox Christians in Ukraine and Russia rarely view ecological problems in light of Jesus' redemptive ministry of salvation; i.e., his plan to heal, bring peace, rescue, reconcile, and restore creation. This means that in the eco-theological consciences of Orthodox and Evangelicals in Russia and Ukraine, there predominates a so-called anthropocentric bias;

i.e., a bias that presupposes that humans are the most important part of God's creation. This bias devaluates the other-than-human creation in God's redemption through Jesus Christ.

#### Eco-Eschatology

Modern biblical scholars argued that Christian eschatology was essential to creation care (Kelly 2015; Moo 2006; Williams 2018), but certain eschatological beliefs, such as premillennial dispensationalism, could discourage Christians from caring for creation (Snyder 2011, p. 55). Basically, Christian eschatology refers to the Second Coming of Christ (Parousia), Final Judgement, resurrection, and the restoration of creation (Noble 2015; Thiselton 2015, p. 382).

Most Orthodox Christians in this study did not think about creation care, environmental issues, nature, and animals in terms of anticipation of an eschatological wholeness to a broken creation. Eschatological texts were mentioned only by 17 interviewees total. Among Orthodox interviewees, one priest from Ukraine mentioned the book of Revelation. He said, "*Revelation teaches that everything will be renewed . . . . Salvation lies not only in the salvation of individual humans (or humanity at all), but in the whole creation, including nature*". The other 16 references to various eschatological biblical texts were made by Evangelicals: Isaiah 11:6 (mentioned 4 times); Romans 8:22 (8 times); 2 Peter 3:10 (5 times); and Revelation (8 times).

Evangelical participants revealed different eschatological positions. Some held a premillennial view. For example, two evangelical interviewees connected Romans 8:22 with the concept of the Millennial kingdom. One stated:

*"I know that the whole creation groans and waits for the revelation of the sons of God . . . . The redemption of the whole creation will take place when humanity is redeemed . . . . Most likely, it is about the Millennial kingdom because the earth and all works will be burned up by that time"*.

Another evangelical pastor interpreted 2 Peter 3:10 literally and said, "*The earth and all works will be burned up, and this is fact. But this does not free us from the responsibility for implementation of the first and second commandments*". Premillennial eschatology is quite common among Evangelicals in Russia and Ukraine. Mokienko (2018) argued that this helped explain a weak environmental concern among Pentecostals in Ukraine (p. 265).

Of course, some Evangelicals admitted that they did not agree with a literal interpretation of 2 Peter 3:10, but believed that in the future the earth will be renewed through God's redemptive work, and that those who did not care for creation will be punished by God. Here are several examples of this viewpoint:

*"As for the texts that say that all works on earth will be burned up, I think that they are imagery and not suggesting that the earth will be destroyed by fire at the end of times. The passages that talk about the new heavens and the new earth do not imply that everything will be brand new. What we have now will be renewed in the future, which is why we should care for it with the understanding that it will be renewed"*.

*"I admit that God's wrath will be on those who are careless about nature and destroy it"*.

*"The making of the new heaven and new earth will be completed with the transformation of the old creation into new. Ecology and other things will work as they should on the new earth. And we should do everything we can to accelerate the fulfilling of this prophecy"*.

#### Bible, Tradition, and Eco-Hermeneutics

Participants in this study had distinct hermeneutical and theological frameworks related to their understanding of authoritative foundations for their faith and practice (Antonenko 2004; Breck 2001; Dobykin 2016; Florovsky 1972; Likhoshesterov 2013; Negrov 2002, 2006, 2008; Puzynin 2012; Stylianopoulos 1997). In this research, it was noted that in expressing personal theological perspectives on ecology and ecological responsibility,

Evangelical interviewees mainly concentrated on the biblical texts and used literal understanding of the Bible, while Orthodox respondents made references to the writings of the Church Fathers and used allegorical (figurative) understanding of biblical passages that they cited. The following three paragraphs highlight the Orthodox viewpoints.

Church Tradition is essential to Eastern Orthodoxy, and therefore the respondents of this tradition illustrated their eco-theological perspectives by mentioning the writings of Church Fathers and/or experience/example of the Orthodox monastics and the just. Several respondents mentioned Seraphim of Sarov, Sergius of Radonezh, Gerasimus of the Jordan, Mary of Egypt, Silouan the Athonite, and Isaac of Nineveh. It was quite interesting that the Orthodox interviewees did not mention Maximus the Confessor, whose theological perspectives on creation are suggested to be relevant for the present ecological crisis (Bordeianu 2009; Jenkins 2008). Among the modern Orthodox spiritual leaders, four interviewees cited the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, Bartholomew I, known for his proenvironmental position (Bartholomew 2015; Chryssavgis 2003), and who is often called the Green Patriarch (Theokritoff 2017).

One of the interviewees, an Orthodox priest from Ukraine, connected the example of the saints with the idea of creation's interconnectedness. He noted, "*Seraphim of Sarov was in harmony and communication with God, which is why he always maintained harmony with God's creation, nature. Therefore, everything is connected and by no means can be divided*".

Five Orthodox interviewees (10% of all Orthodox participants) articulated their eco-theological ideas with the help of figurative interpretations of several biblical texts. For example, one Orthodox priest recounted the story of a Canaanite woman in the Gospel of Matthew 15:21-28. He interpreted the words of this woman—"*Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table*" (v. 27 NIV) as follows, "*In this passage Jesus compares dogs with the non-Jewish nations that are no less valuable than the Jewish people. Thus, for Jesus, the animals are also valuable*". Another Orthodox interviewee indicated that God's creation should be harmonious. This he concluded from the fact that Jesus cursed the fig tree (Mark 11:12-14, 20-25). He stated that the "*poor harvest of the fig tree is a sign of the broken ecological harmony, which leads to and results from the curse. The initial plan of God for the whole creation was to be harmonious and fruitful*". Yet another Orthodox priest from Ukraine made this statement, "*Nature is also involved in salvation of humans because Jesus died on the cross made of wood*". We are not suggesting that these remarks of Orthodox respondents misinterpret biblical text. The point we want to make is that the Evangelical interviewees expressed their eco-theological perspectives by mentioning biblical texts without proposing various deeper levels of meanings to those texts.

## 5. Conclusions

This research has shown that Evangelical and Orthodox Christians in Russia and Ukraine were able to express basic eco-theological Christian ideas, but their eco-theological framework was not yet fully developed. While most Evangelical and Orthodox participants recognized that the ecological situation in the world and their countries was unpleasant, less than 35% of all respondents actively practiced environmental leadership.

There are various trajectories in how Evangelical and Orthodox Christians understand the connection between religion and ecology. On the one hand, their religious beliefs provide the framework for their perception of theory and practice of Christian environmental leadership. Most respondents demonstrated the knowledge of how the Bible corresponds with the ecological crisis and other environmental issues. They shared the belief that the natural world is good since it was created by God, who commanded humans care for a balanced biodiversity and ecosystems.

On the other hand, there are a few factors that impede the development of environmental leadership among Evangelicals and Orthodox in Russia and Ukraine. First, many Christians believe that the value of nature and animals lies in satisfying the physical needs of men and women. This utilitarian and anthropocentric view has little to do with the Bible and/or Christian tradition and rather is rooted in the modernistic worldview. It also



rotted in the anthropocentric view of the salvific work of Christ and in the anthropocentric eschatological perspectives. Second, although most Evangelical and Orthodox Christians believed that the idea of creation care was rooted in the Bible and/or Holy Tradition, only a small number of them agreed that Christians were responsible for practicing and developing environmental leadership. It was especially seen in the responses of Evangelical Christians, who often insisted on the idea that Christians should preach the Gospel and save souls instead of caring for creation. Third, several Evangelical and Orthodox Christians in Russia and Ukraine were skeptical of claims and actions that came from environmentalists, climate activists, and politicians, and thus associated creation care with secular political agendas.

This study revealed that the Evangelical and Orthodox perspectives on eco-theology and environmental leadership can enrich interfaith dialogues and boost meaningful projects related to creation care. Needless to say, environmental issues cannot be addressed by individuals and/or fragmented communities. Of course, it is difficult to foresee that the high-ranking Church leaders, especially in Russia, would urge cooperation between the Evangelicals and Orthodox in fostering eco-theological discussions that will advance effective environmental leadership. Yet, in Ukraine, there are several academic communities that exemplify the willingness for meaningful dialogues and connections between the Evangelical and Orthodox theologians and practitioners (especially, the Department of Theology and Religious Studies of the MP Dragomanov National Pedagogical University, the Open Orthodox University of St. Sophia the Wisdom, and the Eastern European Institute of Theology).

This article's aims were to compare the perspectives of the Orthodox and Evangelical Christians in Russia and Ukraine related to eco-theology and environmental leadership. The article fills the existing gap on the topic and lays the foundation for further inquiry. It is obvious that other studies should pay attention to several urgent and important questions:

- Can/should eco-theology become part of mainstream Orthodox and Evangelical theology in Russia and Ukraine? Or should Evangelicals and Orthodox accept that ecological issues will remain on the periphery of their theological thinking and community service?
- To what extent can anthropocentrism be avoided in the ecological hermeneutics and eco-spirituality within Evangelical and Orthodox traditions?
- Can/should environmental leadership of Russian and Ukrainian Evangelicals and Orthodox be considered/developed as an integral part of God's mission and the mission of the Church?
- How can/should Christian eco-theology equip Evangelical and Orthodox believers in Russia and Ukraine to be effective and ethical leaders that take seriously the task of environmental responsibility in their communities and beyond?

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## Note

- <sup>1</sup> In this article, we use the term “Orthodox Christians” to refer to the religious adherents of the existing independent Orthodox Churches in Ukraine and Russia. The term “Evangelicals” is used to denote those who belong to various Russian and Ukrainian Baptist, Pentecostal, and charismatic congregations.

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