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Church leader makes key visit to U.S.

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With his flowing white beard and long black raiment fluttering in the wind while blessing the waters of the Mississippi through an ancient rite, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, spiritual leader of the world's 250 million Orthodox Christians, looked like a throwback from the past.

Yet this throwback has very salient and progressive concerns. As head of the world's Eastern branch of Christianity, his presence invites many Western Christians to look at a part of their heritage they are largely unaware of, and reminds them that their Eastern brethren share a common humanity.

Based in Constantinople (present-day Istanbul), the primary seat of Orthodox Christianity worldwide, the Patriarch was in New Orleans at the end of last month, ahead of the upcoming United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen next month, to preside over "The Great Mississippi River: Restoring Balance," the eighth international gathering of the Religion, Science & The Environment Symposia, which the Patriarch has been spearheading since 1995.

Also known as the "Green Patriarch," Bartholomew asserts that God, as Lord of Creation, intended for man to be a good steward of Creation. Man therefore has a moral imperative to protect and preserve the environment.

Bartholomew's most recent stateside tour did not end with the symposium. For the Obama administration, the Patriarch's visit to Washington recently was particularly significant from a geopolitical standpoint. It meant an opportunity to connect with Russia, the Balkans and the Middle East through Orthodox Christians, the predominant Christian body in those regions.

The significance of the Patriarch's visit certainly wasn't lost on members of Congress, who passed a resolution unanimously (424-0) in recognition of his leadership "on matters of environment, peace and religion."

Bartholomew also came to America at a time when the U.S. government is trying to refortify relations with Turkey. Though ethnically Greek, Bartholomew is a Turkish citizen, and the Turks are still sore about the U.S.-led intervention in Iraq.

The U.S. wants a reliable Muslim ally in the Near East, but the Turkish government refuses to recognize Bartholomew as the "ecumenical" patriarch, and continues to oppress the cultural and religious freedom of its non-Turkish minorities. The Ecumenical Patriarchate, especially, has suffered. Turkey has

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confiscated hundreds of its properties over the decades and has shut down the theological school on the island of Halki, the Patriarchate's centuries-old training ground for priests, 38 years ago.

In a historic move, Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan met with Bartholomew and other religious leaders in Turkey in August, but according to **Ted Galen Carpenter**, a foreign policy expert at the Cato Institute, a major public policy think tank, Turkey still has a long way to go, and needs to ease up on its minorities in order to demonstrate its reliability as a U.S. and NATO ally.

Among other things, Turkey's admission to the European Union depends on its willingness to show greater tolerance toward its traditionally vulnerable citizens. Such an expression of democratic values would indicate a genuine Western orientation, and would help the U.S. and European Union feel more confident about Turkey as an ally and partner.

Evan C. Lambrou of Ithaca is former managing editor of the National Herald, the country's oldest and largest Greek-American newspaper.

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