

Working Paper

No. 5 | May 2023

Ecotheology - What is the competence of theology in the environmental discourse?

Markus Vogt

Abstract

- > This paper formulates five theses on the specific competence of theology in the ecological discourse. In this context, climate change is interpreted as a sign of the times, against which the Christian discourse of hope, solidarity and justice must prove itself in a new way and can become alive.
- > For the Christian perspective, the connection between ecological and social aspects is decisive, which is developed under the term "ecological humanism". This is life knowledge for a cultural revolution in favor of a changed understanding of progress, freedom and prosperity.
- > However, the churches can only fruitfully contribute their knowledge of orientation to the social dialogue as learners.

I am presenting some theological aspects of the book "Christian Environmental Ethics"¹ in the form of five theses for discussion. My aim is to use a language that is accessible from both religious and secular perspectives and that brings both into conversation with each other.²

1. Ecotheology is the often too superficially understood core competence of the churches in the environmental discourse.

The ecological crisis has an eminently religious dimension. It is productive of religion: it generates a new form of questioning what sustains our existence, gives it future and meaning. What deeply concerns people today is not - as in the 16th century, for example - the salvation anxiety "How can I get a merciful God?" but the question of what justifies our actions before future generations. What enables us individually and collectively to effectively confront the ecosocial burnout of our civilization? This question is a crucial starting point today for the search for what matters, what counts, and thus also for new perspectives on the question of God.

In other words, the environmental crisis in the Anthropocene is a "sign of the times" that can and must prove whether theology has something to say for our present and whether it is able to convey hope. A theology of the signs of the times assumes that it is God himself who speaks to us through the departures and upheavals of the present time and demands a response. Ecological transformation is a *locus theologicus*, a place of God's speaking today, where the "presence of mind" of theology and the church is decided. Raimon Panikkar, an Indian-born Catholic priest, brings this to a theological point of revelation:

"Here's what I would argue: the ecological crisis constitutes a revelation. If you don't see it as a revelation, you don't see it deeply enough and seriously enough. [...] It is not a matter of making a religion out of ecology, but religion becomes ecological. That difference is important."³

It is a strong claim that the ecological crisis represents a revelation. What is meant is that God speaks to us today through the cry of creation, shows himself to us in the maltreated creation. Christian's talk about the salvation of the world becomes void and empty if it does not become a motivation and an empowerment to work to overcome the ecological crisis. Just as in the Enlightenment, in the face of absolutism's contempt for the individual, the defense of the unconditional dignity of the human person became with new urgency the indispensable place of God's speaking, so today the protection of the environment has become the place of probation for Christian faith. Creation is the body of God. In the environmental crisis, the relationship with God is also at stake. It is a sign of the times that demands a new social contract.

¹ Markus Vogt: Christliche Umweltethik. Grundlagen und zentrale Herausforderungen, Freiburg: Herder 2021, 2021 (2. Auflage 2022).

² Cf. for the methodological understanding of Christian Sozial Ethics in this essay: Markus Vogt/Lars Schäfers (2021): Christliche Sozialethik als Öffentliche Theologie (Kirche und Gesellschaft 480), Mönchengladbach, <https://www.gruene-reihe.eu/artikel/christliche-sozialethik-als-oeffentliche-theologie/>.

³ Panikkar, Raimon (1996): Ökosophie, oder: der kosmotheandrische Umgang mit der Natur, in: Kessler, H. (Hg.): Ökologisches Weltethos im Dialog der Kulturen und Religionen, Darmstadt, 58–66, hier 59f.).

2. Ecological humanism is the systematic basis of Christian environmental ethics

At the heart of the search for a sustainable ethical compass in the face of the Great Transformation is the relationship to nature of our civilization. However, it is precisely here that there is a need for critical enlightenment vis-à-vis a spreading ecological naturalism that absolutizes the values of nature and idealizes the balance supposedly found in nature, e.g. as the basis of a truncated understanding of sustainability. This would be "ecology as a doctrine of salvation" (Trepl), as a "substitute religion" (Bolz). Nature, however, is an open order that knows no justice. Evolution is driven by non-equilibrium processes. Nature is morally indifferent. That which is to be considered good and meaningful cannot be deduced from nature in the sense of a deduction. That would be a naturalistic fallacy.

From there the Christian creation theology, which evaluates nature as good, implies an additional dimension. It is not simply the extended arm of ecological imperatives, but points to a cultural depth dimension of the experience of nature and life as a gift, as a gift beyond arbitrary availability. It calls for transcending the subject-object dualism that is deeply inscribed in our scientific thinking, that is, for perceiving nature, animals, and plants not merely as objects but as fellow creatures.

In order to make creation theology fruitful for environmental ethics, process theology is particularly suitable today. This helps to overcome a static understanding of creation. Creation thinking in the claim of process theology does not primarily aim at an ethics of order in the sense of preserving the status quo, but at a creative ethics of transformation, an ethics of conversion and ecological innovation. This would be a decisive impulse to bring environmental ethics out of its defensive position. Christian environmental ethics is innovation ethics, whose claim for shaping arises from the claim of justice and humanity as well as the striving for a happy life. With Konrad Ott, this approach can also be described as eudaimonistic ethics.

I advocate an ecological humanism. This calls for a new generation of human rights: After the individual rights of freedom, the social rights of entitlement and the political rights of participation, ecological rights of existence are needed today. Only such an environmental-ethical spelling out of human rights can prevent them from becoming abstract, empty and unattainable for a large part of humanity today. For me, the principle of sustainability and the Sustainable Development Goals of the UN are to be thought systematically from an ecological extension of human rights. This can also be reconstructed with Felix Ekardt as a temporal and spatial extension of justice.

3. Even as a late learner, the Catholic Church has substantial things to say

The Catholic Church is not a pioneer but a latecomer in environmental discourse. For example, the two key vocabulary words in the environmental discourse of the last twenty years, "climate change" and "sustainability," did not appear once in papal doctrinal pronouncements before *Laudato si'*. One should admit this bluntly in order to understand the often hidden resistance or cluelessness towards the environmental and sustainability discourse in the Church. This is why, for example, churches in the U.S. are often found on the side of climate deniers and transformation opponents. It is important to perceive self-critically that the church and theology are as much part of the

problem as part of the solution: In their deep structure, they have a considerable share in the nature-forgetting civilization. But precisely for this reason, the necessary cultural change cannot be achieved without the churches.

This does not exclude the fact that there have always been pioneering ecological masterminds in the churches - for example, Francis of Assisi, who was named patron saint of environmental protection in 1979. Especially with the environmental encyclical *Laudato si'* (2015), the Catholic Church has caught up mightily. This is currently the world's most important compass for the theological and ethical depth dimension of the upcoming ecosocial cultural change.

With its harsh critique of political and techno-economic abuse of power, it makes liberation theology and thus the critique of power relations fruitful for environmental ethics. Its motivational power lies in the combination of Christian sources of creation spirituality with a virtue-ethical-civil-social approach, which in particular takes up the Latin American indigenous tradition of the good life (*buen vivir*). In terms of social ethics, the analysis of climate change as a collective good problem is striking. The secret of the encyclical's success is the concept of dialogue, which sees the churches as learners - not least ecologically, interculturally and interreligiously.

4. The secularization of Christian hope as optimism for progress must be questioned

Despite all knowledge about climate change and loss of biodiversity, the perception of the situation in the population is predominantly downplayed and suppressed. Harald Lesch rightly contradicts this succinctly in his characterization of the ecological present-day diagnosis of the Anthropocene: "Mankind is doing away with itself". We are already in the sphere of action of ecological tipping points, in which ecosocial catastrophes are becoming increasingly likely.

However, Christians are rightly expected to deliver a message of hope and salvation, a gospel, i.e. a message of joy. From this point of view, the theological underpinning of fear discourses by means of a rhetoric of eco-apocalypse is bad theology. What matters is differentiation: Christian hope is not optimism, but "thwarted hope," a hope that knows about human failure and the catastrophes of suffering and guilt. It draws its confidence from the certainty that God accompanies us even in the abysses of existence and in painful transformation processes.

This applies not least to the current triple crisis of corona, climate change and loss of biodiversity, which can only be overcome by relentlessly exposing the socio-ecological interactions. We largely deal only with the symptoms of the corona crisis and suppress the fact that the probability of pandemics - as the World Biodiversity Council already diagnosed 15 years ago - is massively increasing due to aggressive encroachment into natural areas, the handling of wildlife, hyperglobalization, and other factors. The inconvenient truth is that without a radical change in the relationship to nature and our way of life, we can hardly dampen this probability.

We need a transformation of the concept of progress: instead of continuing to rely on the promise of "faster, higher, further," we should strive for resilience, global solidarity, and ecological transformation. Frugality, resonance and creativity are guiding virtues of a sustainable civilization that should also be promoted structurally, e.g. through a sufficiency policy. The growth model of modernity, which has become a metaphysical

substitute for meaning, is neither ecologically nor socially sustainable. It must be broken up from within by a new culture of sustainability. A turning away from the "growth drug" that is neither resigned nor frozen in static models is the economic-ethical core of a Christian alternative to the current project of expansive modernity.

5. Christian Environmental Ethics is Life Knowledge for a Cultural Revolution

The most important competence of the churches for ecological responsibility is ethical education. This is holistically based on an integration of cognitive, emotional and practical skills: Education for brain, heart and hands. It is, at least according to its claim, a counter-model to "blind reflection", i.e. the inconsequential and abstract knowledge to which - according to the French sociologist Dupuy - a considerable part of the current academic scientific enterprise has fallen prey.⁴ Christian education for sustainability aims at the unity of knowledge and conscience. The *Fridays for Future* movement has given new momentum to such a transformational understanding of education. Students and Scientists for Future formulate and practice consequences for transformative science. The Christians for Future could become the worldwide ecotheological movement that gives validity to the core concerns of my book.

The competence of the churches is not to be understood as the supreme "moral agency" (Joas), but in the sense of a "morality beyond moralizing" (Rahner). This anchors ecological responsibility for the future in narratives of the self-understanding of man and his world, the dramas of guilt and forgiveness, violence and reconciliation, hate and love, of anthropology and cosmology, of hope, failure and departure. It is necessary to relate this knowledge of life to the ability to help shape the current processes of upheaval. Education in the claim of Christian environmental ethics is a discipline of life knowledge that conveys ecological imperatives through narratives and makes them accessible.

Felix Ekardt is rightly skeptical about the social impact of environmental ethics. However, this is only true of an ethics of abstract justifications. However, if it is linked to narratives and holistic education, and communicated across the breadth of culture and society, it certainly has great potential for impact. As global storytelling communities, churches can impart vitality to ethics. Christian environmental ethics today has the task of contributing to a "cultural revolution" in order to, in the words of Pope Francis in a decree reorganizing the study of theology, "steer the model of global development in a different direction and redefine progress."⁵ This also circumscribes the goal of my book.

⁴ Cf. Vogt, Markus: Ethik des Wissens, Freiheit und Verantwortung der Wissenschaft in Zeiten des Klimawandels, München 2019.

⁵ Franziskus, Papst: Veritatis Gaudium. Apostolic Constitution on Ecclesiastical Universities and Faculties, December 27, 2017, Vatican, No. 3.

The author



Markus Vogt, Prof. Dr., is Professor for Christian Social Ethics at the Ludwig-Maximilians-University of Munich and spokesman of the Scientific Advisory Board of *Ordo socialis*.

About Ordo socialis

Ordo socialis is an association for the worldwide promotion of Christian social teaching and scientific social ethics. Ordo socialis was founded as an independent association and scientific subsidiary of the Federation of Catholic Entrepreneurs (BKU) in 1985 after an international congress in Rome. The association has made it its task to stand up for a just global order. Ordo socialis pursues this goal in particular by promoting (digital) international scholarly communication in the field of Christian social ethics. In addition to making social ethical writings available digitally in open access, Ordo socialis works on the worldwide networking of scholars. The association supports them in the dissemination of their ideas and writings, as well as in entering into a dialogue with each other.

Imprint

Published by:

Ordo socialis – Wissenschaftliche Vereinigung zur Förderung der Christlichen Gesellschaftslehre e.V.

Zentralbüro:
Georgstr. 18
D-50676 Köln

E-Mail: gf@ordosocialis.de
Internet: www.ordosocialis.de

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ISSN 2748-5757