



Christian Faith in Creation for Environmental Ethics and Climate Protection

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Abstract

The paper examines the practical consequences of the Christian faith in creation for environmental ethics and climate protection. Both are interpreted as a practical form of faith in creation, distinguishing between faith in creation and reflected theology of creation. Methodologically, the article proceeds by interpreting classical statements of the Bible and the Christian tradition in light of modern insights. The article pays special attention to the conversation between creation theology and modern evolutionary theory. In this context, the problem of theodicy is posed in a new way. The author criticizes tendencies to reduce faith in creation to ethics. In the Christian tradition, he interprets faith in God as a form of courage based on presuppositions that are not absorbed in anthropology and ethics. Christian faith does not produce but proclaim a meaning of life and of the world, which can come to both only from God and will endure even in view of the possible self-destruction of mankind. This conviction has ethical implications and consequences for a realistic commitment to environmental protection. On the one hand, it is motivating, on the other hand, it is critical of an apocalyptic view of the world and its consequences.

Keywords: Climate protection; creation faith; environmental ethics; evolution; preservation of creation.

Abstrak

Artikel ini membahas konsekuensi praktis dari iman Kristen dalam penciptaan untuk etika lingkungan dan perlindungan iklim. Keduanya dimaknai sebagai bentuk praktis dari iman dalam penciptaan, yang membedakan antara iman akan penciptaan dan teologi yang direfleksikan tentang penciptaan. Secara metodologis, artikel ini melanjutkan dengan menafsirkan pernyataan klasik dari Alkitab dan tradisi Kristen dalam terang wawasan modern. Artikel ini memberikan perhatian khusus pada percakapan antara teologi penciptaan dan teori evolusi modern. Dalam konteks ini, masalah teodisi diajukan dengan cara baru. Penulis mengkritik kecenderungan untuk mereduksi kepercayaan pada penciptaan menjadi etika. Dalam tradisi Kristen, ia memaknai iman kepada Tuhan sebagai bentuk keberanian berdasarkan pengandaian yang tidak terserap dalam antropologi dan etika. Iman Kristen tidak menghasilkan, tetapi mewartakan makna hidup dan dunia, yang dapat datang hanya dari Allah dan akan bertahan bahkan dalam pandangan kemungkinan penghancuran diri umat manusia. Keyakinan ini memiliki implikasi dan konsekuensi etis bagi komitmen realistik terhadap perlindungan lingkungan. Di satu sisi itu memotivasi, di sisi lain itu kritis terhadap pandangan apokaliptik tentang dunia dan konsekuensinya.

Kata Kunci: Perlindungan iklim; iman penciptaan; etika lingkungan; evolusi; pelestarian ciptaan.

INTRODUCTION

Natural and climate damage are among the global challenges not only of the present generation, but also of the coming generation. Climate protection and climate justice cannot be seen as isolated problems, but they interfere in a complex way with issues of energy production and consumption, the economy as a whole (Gaard, 2014; Schlosberg & Collins, 2014), but also with issues of international security policy, flight and migration (O'Brien, Clair, & Kristoffersen, 2010; Zwolski, 2010, 2013).

A separate research topic is the question of what role religions and religious beliefs play in climate protection and environmental protection. To what extent do they make a positive environmental-ethical contribution? But to what extent might they themselves be responsible for the exploitation of nature since

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the beginning of modern times? In a much acclaimed but controversial essay, the American historian Lynn T. White (1967) argued that the ecological crisis, as a result of the Industrial Revolution, was due to the Judeo-Christian attitude of domination over nature, the roots of which go back to the Middle Ages (White, 1967). Some Christian fundamentalists even deny that the current climate change is caused by anthropogenic factors.

In turn, it should be pointed out that many Christian churches have been strongly committed to environmental protection and climate protection for decades (Arbuckle & Konisky, 2015; Guth, Green, Kellstedt, & Smidt, 1995), most recently at the 11th Assembly of the World Council of Churches, which took place in Karlsruhe from 31 August to 8 September 2022. Christian churches and theologians speak of creation ethics. However, there is also theological criticism of the tendency to reduce faith in creation to mere ethics. One repeated accusation is that climate protection is a modern kind of substitute religion (Körtner, 2020).

This paper engages with this critique and develops an independent approach to a theology of creation on a Christological basis that resists the danger of reducing Christian faith in creation to moral appeals for environmental protection.

RESEARCH METHODS

The method of the present essay is a hermeneutic procedure in which texts of the biblical tradition are interpreted historically-critically on the one hand and systematically-theologically on the other (Davies, 2007; Rasmussen, 2016; Samely, 2002). This method can be called theological exegesis because it explicitly includes the question of God (Harink, 2009; Loughlin, 1999; Tilling, 2016). It moves in the hermeneutic circle between biblical hermeneutic questions and those of the interdisciplinary dialogue between theology and modern natural sciences. This method is also applied to the ethical questions in this paper. One can therefore speak of a descriptive-hermeneutic ethics.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Active praise of the creator

Environmental protection and climate protection are practical ways of confessing faith in God the Creator (Beukes, 2021; Mok, 2020). What is often called the preservation of creation is only a decidedly Christian endeavor if it expresses a commitment to the One who is the origin and ground of creation. Even more so, if it is not only and primarily guided by the concern for the preservation of nature and the natural foundations of our life, but if at the same time the praise of the Creator takes shape in it. Respecting creation not only for the sake of man, but also for its own sake, is an expression of the gratitude felt in faith for one's own existence as well as for the existence of the world as a whole.

Rightly understood, Christian faith means learning in a new way to live as God's creatures, which is only possible in harmony with the whole of creation (Clough, 2019). I cannot understand myself as a creature of God if I do not at the same time understand and respect the world as God's creation, since we as bodily-soul beings are interwoven with the whole of creation from the moment of our conception and birth. Very elementarily this is shown in the metabolism of our body and with every breath we take. An isolated view of our subjectivity and individuality ignores the fact that we exist in a constant exchange with nature surrounding us and that we can only exist in this way.

The word creation is not just another term for what we call nature, but it puts the natural world into a completely new perspective, namely into the perspective of its reference to God. This reference to God of us humans is, of course, fundamentally disturbed, not to say destroyed. The biblical term for this is sin. It means that a rift develops between God and man, which man cannot close on his own. However, as the Bible testifies, man's turning away from God does not in turn mean God's turning away from us. The fact that God remains faithful and gracious to man is shown in the continuity of the world, which has its basis in the universal love of God, which was finally revealed in Jesus Christ. The Gospel of John expresses it this way: "God so loved the world (Greek: the cosmos) that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). Eternal life, however, is the fulfillment of creaturely life. To be saved from sin and death means to live in a new way as a creature of God. The Gospel of John speaks of being born again in faith (John 3:3-8), namely from the Spirit of God, who is at the same time the Spirit of Christ.

Paul puts it this way, "If anyone is in Christ, this is new creation; old things have passed away, behold new things have come into being" (2 Cor. 5:17). Luther translates, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature." To live by faith is to be born anew, is to be a new creature, and to live in a new way as a creature of God.

What this means can be studied in Luther's interpretation of the Apostles' Creed in his Small Catechism (Luther, 2017). Luther (2008) interprets the statement: "I believe in God the Father, the Almighty, the Creator, of heaven and earth" with the following words:

I believe that God has made me and all creatures; that He has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my limbs, my reason, and all my senses, and still preserves them; in addition thereto, clothing and shoes, meat and drink, house and homestead, wife and children, fields, cattle, and all my goods; that He provides me richly and daily with all that I need to support this body and life, protects me from all danger, and guards me and preserves me from all evil; and all this out of pure, fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me; for all which I owe it to Him to thank, praise, serve, and obey Him. This is most certainly true (Luther, 2008, p. 15).

Note that Luther does not indulge in general speculations about the origin of the cosmos, but that he interprets the confession to God the Creator from his own existence and faith experience. Whoever understands themselves as a creature of God cannot help but at the same time see nature and the world around them as God's creation. Whoever says that God created them must at the same time say: "together with all creatures". The believers experiences daily in their personal lifes that God continuously sustains creation. In faith they realize that all this happens "without all my merit and worthiness". In other words, the very existence of the creature owes itself to the causeless goodness and mercy of God. The justification of the sinner solely as grace and solely through faith in Jesus Christ, thus opens up a new experience of one's own creatureliness. In other words, Luther interprets the faith in creation theologically. One's own existence is unconditional grace, and the appropriate response to this realization is gratitude, which shows itself in appropriate treatment of one's fellow creatures and of all creation. In this, the praise of God resounds just as it does in the celebration of worship, in songs and prayers, in art, and in music.

What we can learn from Luther: Only from the Christ event does the world reveal itself in a final and unambiguous way as God's creation. The question of the meaning and purpose of creation finds its final answer only in Jesus Christ and in the gospel of his incarnation, his death on the cross and his resurrection. The great Reformed theologian Karl Barth put it this way: Creation is the external ground of the covenant between God and man, but the covenant is the internal ground of creation, the covenant in question being ultimately resolved in Christ.

According to the New Testament testimony, however, living as God's creatures always means living in expectation of a new heaven and a new earth. The present world is not paradise. Those who believe in Christ can be sure that they are redeemed from all sins. But the world in which they live is the world not yet redeemed (cf. thesis 5 of the Barmer Theological Declaration of 1934). The hope of redemption is directed to God, not to man. The mindful treatment of creation, more precisely, of our planet and its biosphere, contributes to its preservation, which, however, is ultimately as much God's business as its redemption. Preservation of creation as a human endeavor does not lead to its redemption. The practical praise of the Creator motivates hope and also lament. However, neither man can redeem himself nor the world.

What must also be said: The present world is thus subject to a proviso. In the words of Paul: The form of this world is passing away (1Cor. 7:31), just as our earthly mode of appearance and existence is subject to passing away. The preservation of the world belongs to the last but one, not to the last, to pick up a distinction of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The hope for resurrection and for the kingdom of God, a new heaven and a new earth, must not be confused with the hope for the infinite continuance of the present world.

However, Bonhoeffer has also written:

By the way, I feel more and more how Old Testament I think and feel; so I have read more Old Testament than New Testament in the past months. Only if one knows the ineffability of the name of God, one is allowed to pronounce the name of Jesus Christ; only if one loves life and the earth in such a way that everything seems to be lost and to be over with it, one is allowed to believe in the resurrection of the dead and a new world; only if one accepts the law of God over oneself, one is allowed to speak of grace, and only if the wrath and the vengeance of God over his enemies remain as valid realities, something of forgiveness and of love of enemies can touch our heart. Whoever wants to be and feel too quickly and too directly New Testament is, in my opinion, not a Christian. One cannot and must not speak the last word before the penultimate. We live in the penultimate and believe in the last (Bonhoeffer, 2010, p. 226).

To stand up for environmental and climate protection can be understood in this sense, namely to live in the penultimate in such a way that one tries to live up to the faith in the ultimate, the redemption of the world by God, without rashly becoming New Testament and devaluing the penultimate in an unbiblical way. To quote Bonhoeffer again:

There are people who consider it unserious, Christians who consider it unpious, to hope for a better earthly future and to prepare for it. They believe in the chaos, the disorder, the catastrophe as the sense of the present happening and evade in resignation or pious world escape the responsibility for the further life for the new construction, for the coming generations. It may be that the Last Day will dawn tomorrow, then we would like to lay down the work for a better future, but not before (Bonhoeffer, 2010, p. 36).

The commitment to environmental and climate protection can, of course, also take on the characteristics of a substitute religion that levels the New Testament distinction between the last and the penultimate. This danger will be discussed later.

Creation faith and modern natural sciences

That the world is God's creation is by no means obvious. Whether behind the emergence of the cosmos and the earthly-historical development of life, a divine will or plan is to be found, is disputed. The modern natural sciences get along with their world explanation without the working hypothesis of a creator God. Against the assumption of a direct knowledge of God from nature it is to be objected that

nature and the world are revealed as creation only on the basis of a divine revelation. "Creation" is not merely another linguistic expression for nature. But "nature" and "creation" belong to different language games. What is meant by creation in Christian faith is not identical with the perception of the world as nature. But the meaning of creation must be possible to show and make plausible by nature (Frey, 1989, pp. 217–223).

For the interdisciplinary conversation about creation and evolution, the distinction between subjective statements of faith and scientific-theological statements, which have statements of faith as their object, is of essential importance. Thus, in the conversation between theology and natural science, it is not so much about the relationship between evolutionary theory and *faith* in creation, but of that between evolutionary theory and *theology* of creation.

Whoever wants to deal scientifically with biblical creation statements is dependent on biblical scientific, exegetical expertise. This includes, for example, some basic knowledge of religious studies and literary studies about the genesis of the first chapters of Genesis, about their literary genre and their contemporary historical context. The same applies to creation statements in the Psalms, the prayer book of the Old Testament, in the ancient Israelite wisdom literature such as the Book of Proverbs of Solomon or the Book of Job, as well as to the hymn-like prologue of the Gospel of John or the hymn in the Epistle to the Colossians (Col 1:15-18), which praises Christ's mediatorship in creation. Thus, the dialogue between theology and natural science on creation and evolution has to take into account not only the difference between theology and faith, but also between biblical and systematic theology.

In the conversation between faith or theology and natural sciences, the art of translation and understanding is required. The problems of understanding already begin with the language. Not only when we want to communicate in a foreign language, but already in our own language it can be difficult to understand each other, although we supposedly speak the same language. If two people say the same thing, it does not mean that they mean the same thing. Meaning and significance, the semantic function of a linguistic sign and its referent, can differ.

The views of reality respectively connected with the terms "creation" and "nature" lie on different levels and are at best complementary. They stand in a comparable tension to each other like the physical interpretation of matter as particle on the one hand and as wave on the other hand. Similarly, a natural scientific description of reality relates to a creation-theological interpretation of reality, whereby we must be aware that the concept of complementarity is expanded here compared to its physical use, because there it remains limited to an object area. Both views, the scientific one and the one of the faith in creation, cannot be cancelled out into a synthesis, but represent complementary interpretations of reality, each having its own plausibility, because they represent their own types of experiences.

Creation and Evolution

The modern theory of evolution gives a new meaning to the idea of indirect and continued creation, *creatio mediata* or *creatio continua*. Since the emergence of species is not a completed process in the past, but an ongoing and undetermined process, the indirect creation can no longer be equated, as in pre-modern dogmatics, with the six-day work from Gen 1 and cannot be regarded as a completed phase of divine action. The continuous creation does not only consist in the preservation of the world (*conservatio mundi*), rather creation and preservation of the world are interwoven in a dynamic process, that is open to future.

Evolutionary thinking challenges theology not only by abandoning the metaphysical category of a final purpose of natural history. The problem consists not only in the category of chance, but above all in

the theological assessment of selection and destruction. Tribal change proceeds by gradual changes with the displacement of less efficient variants. It is "embedded in a court of destruction by complete derailment of the life processes" (Gutmann & Bonik, 1981, p. 15). Malformations and maldevelopments, which can lead to death, can be understood not only as the result of external selection, but above all as internal selection taking place within embryonic development. It is this internal selection that ensures the basic functionality of living beings.

If evolution is to be interpreted as creation, the theodicy problem, consisting in the question about the goodness and justice of God, arises. From the point of view of evolutionary theory, the forces of destruction are not in opposition to the creativity of life, but deformities, maldevelopment and death form the prerequisite for the viability of the remaining living beings. The assumption of a paradisiacal original state, a *status integritatis* without death and destruction, stands in contradiction to the fashionable evolution theory.

The Catholic writer Reinhold Schneider (1903-1958) formulated this insight like hardly anyone else. In his diary "Winter in Vienna" he speaks openly of his skepticism and the absurdity of a believing existence. A walk through the Museum of Military History becomes a symbol of Schneider's pessimistic theology of history: "From step to step, on the way through the rooms, God's image is veiled more and more densely. Now, at the exit, it has disappeared" (Schneider, 2003, p. 249). The same sensation arises during a visit to the Museum of Natural History. Here, too, God is "as near as he is far. It is impossible to deny him facing this immense world of figures, this appalling abundance of inventions" (Schneider, 2003, p. 129); but "the face of the Father? That is quite incomprehensible" (Schneider, 2003, p. 131).

Schneider's diary entries can be read as an objection against the ideology of the creationists and the idea of an "intelligent design" as well as against all too carefree ecclesiastical normal dogmatics. Those entries challenge theological reflection, and from them speaks precisely not the spirit of a clumsy atheism, but a believing skepticism, which is right in the fact that doubt nourishes faith and faith nourishes doubt.

What darkens the face of the Creator God, whose existence Schneider has no doubt about, is the basic biological law of eating and being eaten, which must not be toned down to a harmless "dying and becoming". The very fascination of "design," the "admiration of the expediency with which one animal is endowed for the destruction of another [...] borders on despair" (Schneider, 2003, p. 178).

The biblical creation story judges that God created the world "very well". This is not a statement about the existing world, but about the original creation, which is presented as a world without violence between humans and animals, but also without violence among animals. In truth, however, *Homo sapiens* is also a product of nature characterized by eating and being eaten.

It was the late antique gnosis that ascribed the world as creation not to the benevolent God of the Bible but to a demiurge. And until today the question of the gnosis remains the thorn in the flesh of the Christian faith in creation, whether one accuses God of evil, if one claims from him that God created the world.

The challenged creation belief may hold on to the thought that nature loses its inner contradictoriness and ambiguity by the fact that the supremacy of life in the process of evolution is stronger than the forces of destruction. The insight into the superiority of natural life, however, does not yet make it appear reasonable. Traugott Koch (1937-2015) tries to prove the rationality of nature following Hegel by formulating the thought that God himself suffers death in the process of the becoming and the passing away of nature and that God maintains himself through it (Koch, 1991, p. 67). However, the abysmalness of the faith in creation that then breaks out can hardly be mitigated by the fact that

affirmation of life through faith applies to the "'idea' of life" (Koch, 1991, p. 80), which is idealistically kept free from the aspect of destruction.

Without faith in God's revelation and self-imagination as testified to in the Bible, even more, without the revelation of the Creator in Jesus Christ, the world cannot be recognized and believed to be God's good creation. Without the hope of its redemption and perfection, which stands in the tension between the confession of faith and the experience of the world, the statement that this world is God's good creation remains superficial. The fact that the world has a meaning and a goal is not revealed by itself, but only by God's revelation in the history of Israel and his ultimate revelation in Jesus Christ.

Preservation of creation

If the idea of creation is to be related to the history of the cosmos and the evolution of life, the indirect and continued creation (*creatio mediata et continua*) is to be thought of as an open dynamic process. Thus now also the thought of the preservation of the world and/or the preservation of the creation, classically called *conservatio mundi*, gains a changed dynamic meaning beyond a static conception, as it is based on the traditional doctrine of the orders of creation. The continuing creation is subject to ongoing changes. In this process completely new things arise again and again, whose emergence can be understood with the help of the emergence concept (Hefner, 1999, p. 1254). Emergence means the emergence of novel and higher forms that cannot arise without the preceding forms, however, with all continuity also discontinuities show. The continued creation and its preservation are to be thought of accordingly neither statically nor in the sense of a mechanistic causal scheme. Therefore now also the preservation of creation cannot be interpreted as conservation of a once reached state of the world or of a stock of biological species existing at a certain time in history. In this respect one must say that the six-day work of creation from the myth in Gen 1 persists.

While classical dogmatics describes the integrity of creation as the work of God, more recently this topos has migrated into ethics. The conciliar process of peace, justice and integrity of creation has equated the integrity of creation with God's mandate to man in Gen 2:15 to cultivate and preserve the earth, in order to interpret from here also the mandate of man to subdue the earth and to rule over the animals (Gen 1:26-28). This is considered problematic today because of its history of effects. The care for the garden of paradise, however, is not to be equated with the preservation of creation by man, especially since paradise or the garden of Eden is not identical with the entire creation.

The preservation of creation in the sense of its *conservatio* is not the theme in Gen 2:15, but the content of the divine promise at the end of the Flood narrative in Gen 8:22. Only there, and not in Gen 2, the existence of the world is made into its own theme. The existing world is understood as preserved by God from its destruction (Westermann, 1976, p. 618). However, Gen 8,22 interprets its temporal continuance neither as *creatio continua* like the dogmatic tradition of Christianity nor as a promise of blessing, which would rest on the action of man, named in Gen 2,15. That the promise of Gen 8,22 would be fulfilled by the human activity of building and preserving the earth is just as far from the Yahwistic Flood narrative as the thought that the sinful human race itself triggered the destruction of creation, averted by God at the last moment. Both, their possible destruction as well as their preservation are exclusively attributed to the creator. Neither in the one nor in the other case man is thought of as a secondary cause of the divine action. It should therefore also be considered that the Vulgate translates the Hebrew *shamar*, which means "to preserve" or also "to keep" or "to guard," not with "conservare" but with "custodire." If the anthropological definition in Gen 2:15 and the theological definition in Gen 8:22 are both brought to the concept of the preservation of creation, this equivocation leads to dogmatic and ethical short-cuts.

As little as *samar*, which is to be read complementary to the Hebrew *avad* (= to cultivate) (Westermann, 1976, p. 301), asserts participation of man in the divine activity of the *conservatio mundi*, the circumstantial identification of the garden as described in Gen 2 together with the entire creation is equally questionable. According to biblical understanding, creation comprises heaven and earth. The garden laid out by God in Eden, however, merely symbolizes the limited living space initially assigned to man. A garden is a piece of cultivated land, which remains a limited part of the whole creation even if man expands the boundaries of this space through his cultural achievements. More precisely, there are three circles in the Genesis narrative: paradise, from which man is expelled, then the field he cultivates, and finally the barren land, to which Cain is later expelled from the field. But with this, strictly speaking, the order from Gen 2,15 has become irrelevant. Now man is to cultivate the soil beyond Eden (Gen 3:23). It is systematic-theologically of importance that the creation of the garden in Gen 2,8, according to the knowledge of exegetical research, must not be equated at all with the creation of the world, or with the work third day of creation in the priestly scriptural narration (Gen 1,11f.) (Westermann, 1976, p. 248).

The dogmatic teaching of the preservation of creation is to be applied to the entire cosmos. On the other hand, it would be presumptuous and downright ridiculous to interpret the command of Gen 2:15, which is addressed to man, as a command to preserve the cosmos. To the divine preservation of the creation belong from the view of the faith the physical laws of nature and the fine tuning of the initial conditions that made it possible at all, that the cosmos could develop observable by us.

If one follows Gen 2,15 and Gen 3,23, the preservation of the human habitat happens through by the care as well as through the cultural treatment of nature. Transferred into today's contexts of action, Gen 2,15 does not speak of the protection of untouched nature, but also not only of the care for the preservation of the natural basis of human life. Gen 2 does not describe the wilderness of an untouched nature, whose aesthetics probably rather correspond to the romanticism of our urban civilization than to the experience of the prehistoric struggle for existence, but Gen 2 speaks deliberately of a garden, meaning the cultivated or cultivable nature. If we want to speak of a human mission to preserve creation at all, then it consists, following Gen 2,15, of preserving nature on our planet not for its own sake, but as an anthropomorphic habitat. The anthropomorphically interpreted nature not only enables, but virtually requires the cultivating work of man. The perception of nature as creation and the determination of work as an essential part of man therefore belong together according to Gen 2:15. Because the human being finds himself already as such for the treatment of nature and this with it as for such cultivation determined, the creation and the creative action of God lie ontologically before the human being and his action. It is this ontologically describable fact, and not human sinfulness, which, according to biblical understanding, excludes man from preserving creation in the sense of *conservatio mundi*.

Faith in God in times of climate change

“The spirit of our time or that of the future,” Ludwig Feuerbach noted in 1842/43, “is that of realism. The new religion, the religion of the future, is politics” (Feuerbach, 1966). His prophecy seems to be coming true in the current debates and political disputes about climate change. Much is being written and argued about whether the new ecology movement to protect the climate represents a form of substitute religion or, theologically-dogmatically speaking, even a new heresy. To use the words of Karl Barth: Unbelief in the form of faith.

However, the thesis of climate protection as a substitute religion is by no means self-explanatory. To label Greta Thunberg either as a humorless prophet of a new climate god or as a modern Joan of Arc, or to compare her with the invulnerable Prometheus, if one prefers to borrow from Greek mythology, as

Johannes Schneider does in DIE ZEIT, may not be completely plucked out of thin air. Admittedly, she herself does not refer to religion, but to science. Nevertheless, some of her followers and sympathizers also revere her as a modern prophetess. DIE ZEIT felt that Thunberg's angry speech at the UN Climate Summit 2020 in New York was inappropriately reminiscent of Luther's appearance at the Reichstag in Worms, and the Archbishop of Berlin, Heiner Koch, even went so far as to compare the Friday demonstrations for climate protection with Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. To call the young Swede the new Pippi Longstocking, as has often been done, simply because of her pigtails is, however, flat. It does not explain her personality and impact conclusively.

The positively or negatively intended equation of Thunberg with a modern prophetess is too superficial; in terms of the sociology of religion, a distinction must be made between the type of a saint and that of a charismatic, as sociologist Hans Joas has pointed out (Sauerbrey, 2019). To what extent one can nevertheless speak of a quasi-religious veneration and of the climate protection movement as a modern religion in the present case is a far more complex question than some observers might think.

What is striking about the *Fridays for Future* movement is its faith in science. I don't mean to deny the seriousness of climate research and its various scenarios, but the role it is granted as the final authority on political issues gives it a quasi-religious position reminiscent of 19th century positivism, but also of Marxism-Leninism, which was also convinced that it was acting on a strictly scientific basis and considered its revolutionary program to have no alternative. In terms of democratic politics and social policy, such faith in science, coupled with moral rigorism, can conjure up dangers for a free society and its social cohesion, because the costs to be paid for rigorous environmental policies may be distributed very differently in society.

The Viennese sociologist Alexander Bogner observes a rampant "epistemocratization of the political," which means that political problems and conflicts are fought out as a struggle for better knowledge (Bogner, 2021). Bogner refers to the now widespread belief "that many of the current crises, conflicts or disputes can only be properly understood or properly formulated when they are essentially about matters of knowledge or when we negotiate them as problems regarding knowledge" as "epistemocracy" (Bogner, 2021, p. 119). At the same time, the dispute over better knowledge becomes morally charged. Those who disagree with scientific hypotheses or the conclusions drawn from them may not only be following a flawed scientific theory, but acting immorally. This poses a danger to liberal democracy, since better knowledge by no means automatically leads to correct or better policies.

For Ludwig Feuerbach the continued existence of churches was not a sign of remaining genuine faith. Believers continue to speak of God's blessing, but they seek actual help only from people. Therefore, the blessing of God is "only a blue haze of religion in which the believing unbelief conceals its *practical* atheism" (Feuerbach, 1966, p. 233). Is this also true today?

Let's take a look at a document of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) entitled "'Geliehen ist der Stern, auf dem wir leben' [Borrowed is the star on which we live]. The 2030 Agenda as a Challenge for the Churches" (Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland, 2018). The document is remarkable, among other things, because it documents the failure of classical topoi of the Christian doctrine of God and creation, while talking explicitly about God. Already the metaphor of creation as a loan, which is taken from a song line by Jochen Rieß (1931–2015), signals the theological deficits. God, as the text is to be understood, originally created the world, but then handed it over to the exclusive responsibility of human beings, who are comprehensively and indefinitely responsible to their Creator for dealing with the loan, but may no longer expect any active action or intervention from him. Apart from the fact that the eschatological hope for a new heaven and a new earth is equated with the continuance of the present creation, the hope that

God can still save the "tilting world" (Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland, 2018) is condemned as "cheap grace" by using a well-known Bonhoeffer expression. The image of the loan also suggests the notion of a static state of nature that is to be identified as creation and protected in its present state. The relationship between creation and evolution is determined in a way that far from being sufficiently complex. At the same time, the doctrine of God's ongoing creative action and his preservation of the world - in the language of the theological tradition: *creatio continua* and *conservatio mundi* - is completely lost from view. God acts only as a motivator for human action through his promises and through his love as witnessed in Jesus Christ. The gospel of what God alone has done and is doing in the world and for human beings is reinterpreted as an ethical appeal for climate protection.

I consider this by no means only an ethical problem, but also a deeply dogmatic one. Basically, an absent God is being proclaimed. Politics as the religion of the future: Has it finally found its way into the Protestant church, too, when presenting small-scale political climate protection goals, which can already be found in all kinds of strategy papers of the UN and other organizations, finally also in a slightly heightened religious tone, which, however, can just as well be omitted?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who committed himself to the existence of the world and to a better future as long as the Last Day had not yet come (Bonhoeffer, 2010, p. 36), lived in the belief that God not only waits for responsible deeds of man, but also responds (Bonhoeffer, 2010, p. 31). A faith that no longer reckons with God's activity in the world and in history is, however, a practical atheism, as Feuerbach says. However, belief in God is not to be confused with a guarantee of continued existence for this earth and mankind.

Christian faith is not synonymous with hope for the continuation of the world. Nor does it consist of an apocalyptic hope for another world beyond the possible catastrophe. Rather, faith affirms the world in the face of its real possible negation and annihilation today. It is primarily not a form of hope, but, as Paul Tillich and Karl Rahner have made clear, a way of courage. Christian faith is courage for the questionable being, which does not become insane even if a salvation-historical-utopian perspective is threatened and questionable (Koch, 1991).

In his attitude toward existence, he resembles less Prometheus than Sisyphus, who in Albert Camus faces the absurd and revolts against it. In the face of global dangers, Camus is to be rediscovered as an interlocutor of theology. His myth of Sisyphus describes the attitude of courage to affirm oneself in the face of the absurd. Christian faith comes conceivably close to this attitude. What distinguishes it from Camus is the hypothetical character of the absence of God, whose presence can admittedly only be stated as a paradox. In contrast to Camus' courage, Christian faith is, to speak with Paul Tillich, the courage to affirm oneself as affirmed.

Courage is an ethical concept. As an affirmation of the questioned being, faith has to prove itself practically in the commitment against everything catastrophic that makes the world apocalyptic. Faith does not stare fearfully at the end of the world, nor does it give in to the apocalyptic desire for destruction, but rather affirms the life affirmed by God and the world affirmed by God through its active commitment to both in the here and now.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, it is a matter of taking the perspective of Christian eschatology seriously. Whoever loves the world in such a way that everything seems to be lost with it, without desperately clinging to it, ascribes to it an unconditional meaning that it does not have of itself and which is also not inscribed in nature, which is sometimes romantically transfigured today. However, this meaning remains withdrawn from human

power of disposal. It can only come adventitiously to human action. Christian faith does not produce, but proclaim a meaning of life and of the world, which can come only from God and will endure even in view of the possible self-destruction of mankind.

It is a task of further research to compare the position developed in this paper with other conceptions of a Christian environmental ethic, especially those belonging to process theology. Statements of churches and church associations such as the World Council of Churches could also be examined more closely. Another research task is the critical analysis of statements on climate change that can be assigned to the fundamentalist stream of Christianity.

However, at least this much can be said about the ethical implications of this paper: The commitment to a consistent climate policy is necessary and sensible. Nevertheless, the noble goals of the Paris climate protection agreement will probably not be achieved. The growth of the world's population and its increasing hunger for energy will erode the successes in climate protection that we hope to achieve. Anyone who has the well-being of future generations in mind must also face up to this reality. It remains a balancing act to try to curb climate change on the one hand and to take measures of adaptation on the other hand in order to be able to cope with it to some extent.

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