Climate Justice from a Christian point of view: challenges for a new definition of wealth

Religion in Global Environmental and Climate Change: Sufferings, Values, Lifestyles
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1 Climate change as a question of justice, peace and human rights

Responsibility in climate change is – in the first place – not a problem of knowledge, but a problem of faith: we don’t believe, what we know, because we can not sufficiently imagine, what it means for us and for the fate of people all over the world and for life at all on earth. We are not able to react adequately, because we don’t have experience with such a deep, complex change of life-conditions. The consequences are – for the most decision makers - too far away. The conference in Copenhagen showed that we are “atheists of future”. In order to enable us to realize what climate change means and to react adequately it’s necessary to translate the scientific data we have into descriptions of what in means for society in terms of sufferings, values and lifestyles. So we need cultural sciences in order to overcome that deep gap between knowledge and belief in that very specific meaning.

Here are just a few opening remarks about perception and understanding of climate change from an ethical point of view:

- Climate change is, for the most part, man-made (anthropogenic). So, from an ethical point of view, it has to be classed not a stroke of fate, but as a question of justice. The scale of climate change is so vast that it affects every aspect of developing globalisation.

- Humankind has never before interfered so extensively in the biosphere, with such far-reaching spatial and temporal consequences.

- Climate change is a culture shock. The world we used to know no longer exists. An axial age of radical transformation stands before.

- Climate change will lead to a creeping destruction of the homes and food sources of countless people in subtropical regions. It will undermine the existence of 2.5 billion people worldwide who make their living from agriculture.

- Climate change is a direct attack on the economic, social and cultural rights of several hundred millions of people. The right to live under humane conditions can only be safeguarded by climate protection measures.

- The unresolved problem of levels of emission rights is one of the greatest opportunities for injustice in the present phase of global development.

- Climate change and the associated debates about access to resources, the destruction of habitats and the migration of many hundreds of millions of people are all central questions for the various national foreign and security policies.

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1 Sloterdijk 2009.
2 IPCC 2007a; Rahmstorf/Schellnhuber 2007, 29-52, Schönwiese 2008, 17-21; cf. on the following also Linekamp 2009 and Vogt 2009, esp. 44-49 and 415-419.
3 Cf. Leggewie/Welzer 2009, 13f.
4 Santarius 2007, 21.
5 UNDP 2007, 1-16; Oxfam published differentiated research about the human rights abuses resulting from climate change in September 2008; Oxfam International 2008, esp. the table p. 6; according to this, the rights to life and to security of person, and access to food and healthcare of many hundred million people are under threat or have been negatively affected.
Climate change represents what is most likely the greatest threat to the existence of the current and future generations, and to the continued existence of non-human life on earth.”

Justice and peace cannot be realized in the 21st century without climate protection. In the specific ethical debate about climate change the human rights approach might be the most important one because it generates a closer fusion between moral and legal assessment. The right to physical integrity lays the foundation for human rights; therefore, lowering the level of greenhouse gas emissions is an act of protecting human rights. Within all that discussion is a profound conflict between climate protection and the fight against poverty. Then the well-known and financially viable methods of economic development are to a large extent dependent on access to fossil fuels. However, there is no capacity left in the atmosphere for the CO$_2$ that would be emitted by developing countries if they were to develop along the same lines as the industrialized nations. The technical possibilities for fighting poverty and protecting the climate, and for the integration of these two aims, are in theory relatively good. Realizing these aims is primarily a question of overcoming political and institutional obstacles, as the necessary investments can only be made in conditions which facilitate a fair, cooperative and long-term sharing of the burden. Currently, from the point of view of the developing countries, there are hardly any consensual and attractive suggestions on the table for fair “burden sharing” in terms of climate protection.

The particular nature of ethical problems that arise as a result of climate change lies in the big distance between initiators and victims. This distance can be defined in three ways: Climate change is having a profound and negative impact on (1) future generations, (2) the poorer countries in the southern hemisphere and (3) the habitats of fauna and flora and thereby also on the relationship between humans and nature. It can be regarded as a threefold externalization of the costs of our way of life: it falls and will fall to the future, to the poor and to the nature. The German Conference of Catholic Bishops has referred to climate change as the “crossroads of global, intergenerational and ecological justice” on the basis of this analysis.

It is an exemplary field for justice research, encompassing new dimensions of justice, solidarity, the protection of wealth and responsibility for the natural world in the 21st century. “Climate change will undermine international efforts to combat poverty.” It makes the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) impossible. With the awareness of global warming, the fight to reduce poverty has a new focal point and a new dimension of complex interrelations. Many distribution problems are exacerbated and have become a struggle for access to resources and habitats, no longer resolvable through traditional models of growth. Ecological problems overwrite social conflicts without erasing them.

The ethical-political problem is particularly complex, boasting an opaque web of winners and losers, both in terms of climate change and in terms of our climate-hostile economic system.

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7 WBGU 2008, bes. 15-42 and 169-190.
8 The German Bishops 2007, Nr. 1.
13 UNDP 2007, 1. “Some 262 million people were affected by climate disasters annually from 2000 to 2004, over 98 percent of them in the developing world.” (page 8)
Since climate change affects people differently - in terms of geography, immediacy, and in the nature of the impact itself - there is a broad range of interests and perspectives at stake.

Moreover, on a more fundamental level, there are the dilemmas of ecological versus social-economical interests, short-term versus long-term and national versus global concerns which are often not directly resolvable by individual agents or political movements. The dilemmas are so deep that it was not a realistic expectation that they could be solved in Copenhagen. They are connected to the cultural and ethical foundations of our society, which are not simply changeable on the level of a UN-conference. We have to speak about our values and our understanding of wealth, which guide the economic development of modern and postmodern society.

Climate protection needs a code of ethics which shows up the opportunities for injustice, analyses dilemmas and provides firm criteria on which to base political decisions. We have to speak about philosophy of nature, about anthropology and the complexity of human wishes, hopes and conflicts and about the cultural reasons and obstacles of changing behaviour. Without an understanding of that cultural dimension of responsibility in climate change the political negations will not have a chance to change society.

2 Ethical bearings in the conflict between development rights and climate protection

Managing climate change is a challenge facing the whole society. This assertion has legal and ethical basis in the 1960s concept of nature as the “common heritage of mankind.” The ethical challenge posed by climate change involves three kinds of solidarity:

- Long-term solidarity, incorporating measures of prevention or mitigation of climate change through the rejection of fossil fuels. Since everyone would be affected, climate change here is a question of cooperation or con-solidarity.
- In the medium-term, adaptive measures are the main priority (e.g. water provision, resettlement, ecological and agricultural adaptation).
- Short-term solidarity is mainly a question of disaster response, hitherto something which has been relatively well provided, partial thanks to pity-inducing media images. The ever-intensifying scale of disasters calls for these reactive measures to be backed up by the establishment of international funds. This kind of help can be termed pro-solidarity.

The pressure to cooperate as a result of climate change requires a different kind of solidarity, one that does not fit into existing structures; it demands engagement with a distant crisis. On the level of global climate protection there is a serious deficit of legal control, which generates freeloading mentality and a collective inertia, which blocks all initiatives. Institutional reforms in the United Nations which would result in a greater degree of legal control have therefore become a matter of urgency. We need a new way of global governance in order to balance marked orientated ideas (such as trade offs), solidarity based ideas (fair distribution of resources) and a stable legal framework of global development. To form a firm basis for inter-departmental multilateral negotiations, it would be necessary to create an independent organisation for environmental concerns, equipped with the power to impose sanctions, under the umbrella of the UN. The idea of an Environmental Court of Justice is

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15 This is also a legging claim in the new encyclical “Caritas in veritate” of pope Benedict XVI 2009, No. 67. Ethical bearings regarding to environment: No. 48-52.
16 Epiney 2007, 38. What the individual reforms should look like is a difficult political question.
also gaining in popularity, in order to sanction those whose actions in breach of international regulations affect a large sector of the population. The critical ethical and political challenge is to overcome short-term thinking and activate moral, political and economic solidarity in order to move from mere reactive disaster aftercare to preventative climate protection and innovative energy technology. That move from a reactive to a preventative concept is also necessary in the context of security- and peace-policy: “If you like peace, protect creation” is the message of Pope Benedict XVI for the day of peace at 1\textsuperscript{st} January 2010.\textsuperscript{17}

Despite the conditions of the Kyoto protocol, there has still been an increase in CO\textsubscript{2} emissions of about 40% since 1990. It is imperative that we act decisively and quickly. At the same time, the global deal calls for a much stronger cooperation with developing countries to achieve reduction targets, since their share of CO\textsubscript{2} emissions is rising, in some cases very quickly. Coal is one of the major problems for climate protection. Climate change is the greatest collective problem humanity has ever had to face. We will only succeed if we can negotiate a new balance between freedom and justice.\textsuperscript{18} Enforcing efficient climate protection measures requires us to take our leave from the inward-looking national political perspectives and establish new institutions.\textsuperscript{19}

### Green development rights

Key to understanding the conflict between climate protection and the fight against poverty is the recognition of the right to development. Global climate protection is only acceptable to the majority of developing countries if it is combined with recognition of the right to development, encompassing (a) the satisfaction of basic human needs, (b) freedom from deprivation and vulnerability and (c) a basic degree of safety and wellbeing. The right to development is not the same as the right to economic growth; it is a right to the conditions that support the sustaining of life in dignity.

The Heinrich Böll Foundation’s study “The right to development in a world threatened by climate change” combines the indicators for responsibility for and capacity to influence climate protection to form a “responsibility and capacity indicator” (RCI\textsuperscript{20}). The study assumes that responsibility and capacity can only be freed up from that portion of income and emissions which are not directly necessary for existence.\textsuperscript{21}

This is similar to the basic principle of tax law, which states that the subsistence level of income must be free from state payments - that is to say, at this level, there are no resulting duties to the state. The requirement to contribute towards international climate protection is conceived as a kind of luxury tax on the global consumer class.\textsuperscript{22} Only those people who belong to the global consumer class have the responsibility, and indeed the capacity, to pay their dues to a climate-political emergency program.\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{17} Benedikt XVI 2009b.
\textsuperscript{18} Edenhofer/Lotze-Campen 2008, 9.
\textsuperscript{19} Ekardt 2008, 17-29.
\textsuperscript{21} “We define capacity as income, excluding all income below the development threshold. We define responsibility as cumulative CO\textsubscript{2} emissions, excluding all emissions deriving from consumption below the development threshold.” (Baer/Athanasiou/Kartha 2007, 11) Income below this is termed “survival income” or “survival emission” respectively and cannot be claimed for climate-political purposes.
\textsuperscript{22} Cf. Baer/Athanasiou/Kartha 2007, 32: “luxury’ emissions”.
\textsuperscript{23} Cf. Baer/Athanasiou/Kartha 2007, 33: “Countries cannot be asked to incur any mitigation costs as long as they are developing.” On the quantification of Global Development Rights cf. 23-44.
The million dollar question - almost literally - with regard to this concept is how to define the threshold between basic subsistence and luxury.\textsuperscript{24} The responsibility and capacity model can calculate the actual quantitative reduction in emissions that is required; according to the model, a third of the efforts towards climate protection should come from the US and a quarter from Europe.\textsuperscript{25}

Another concept for a common contract on CO\textsubscript{2} justice is currently being debated under the title contraction and convergence (C&C). This combines a contract which fixes an upper limit for global CO\textsubscript{2} emissions (contraction) with a gradual introduction of a distribution of emission rights according to egalitarian principles (convergence).\textsuperscript{26} Basis for the fixing of a global upper limit is a consensus within society about the level of the ecological risk that can be justified. The grandfathering\textsuperscript{27} principle eases the transition for countries with a high level of emissions. It can be justified ethically as property protection and pragmatism.

An important axiom of the human-rights and developmental-ethics-based approach to climate protection as discussed right here is the fact that global climate justice is enacted on a per capita basis, rather than per nation state. The principle of an equal distribution of emission rights is ethically justified by the fact that climate is something we share. All of the earth’s inhabitants must in principle have equal access.\textsuperscript{28} Egalitarianism in terms of climate politics can be interpreted by the “golden rule”: we can talk about CO\textsubscript{2} justice when no individual produces more CO\textsubscript{2} than s/he tolerates others emitting. But aiming for absolute equality between human beings is problematic in two respects. Geographical and cultural differences result in different needs; in justice theory, this can be described as treating equals equally and unequals unequally.\textsuperscript{29}

The principle of proportionality argues for a higher contribution from these groups. The “polluter pays” principle demands that the industrialized nations, which in the last 150 years produced more than 90\% of harmful gases, contribute the lion’s share towards climate protection measures. But this begs the question to what extent the past should form the basis for a contemporary concept of justice. So there is a plethora of very different points of view, all of which are worthy of consideration in terms of justice theory; in spite of many problematic issues, the per capita distribution of emission rights can be seen as an acceptable and workable approach to climate justice. It should serve to give us our ethical and political bearings, at least as long as the ethical and political discourse and the provision of reliable data on the costs of climate change and climate protection do not reach any other broad consensus.

\begin{itemize}
  \item The authors assume that an annual income of 9,000 US dollars (purchasing power) is usually enough to meet basic needs and is therefore the passport to the “global middle class Baer/Athanasiou/Kartha 2007, 82-84. Income is calculated in terms of purchasing power.
  \item Baer/Athanasiou/Kartha 2007, 5; cf. also Baer/Athanasiou/Kartha 2007, 12: The burden is shared as follows: USA 34.4\%, EU 26.6\%, Russia 5.5\%, China 7\%. An optimistic estimate, which calculates the costs for emergency assistance at 1\% of the world gross national product, the following costs per inhabitant are incurred over the “development threshold” ca. 780 US dollars annually in the USA, 372 dollars/year in the EU, 142 dollars/year in China.
  \item Baer/Athanasiou 2007, 14-18; Baer/Athanasiou/Kartha 2007, 23-45.
  \item The term “grandfathering” means that in respect to the history and the tradition of earlier generations not an abrupt change is demanded but a gradual chance. On this see Baer/Athanasiou 2007, 14f.; Rahmstorf/Schellnhuber 2007, 18f.
  \item Santarius 2007, 24.
  \item For an ethical and philosophical discussion of the legal aspects of egalitarianism, which has rather unexpectedly become highly relevant as part of the climate justice debate with respect to equal rights to CO\textsubscript{2} emissions, cf. Pauer-Studer 2009, 207-231.
\end{itemize}
Particularly controversial from an ethical point of view are those parts of the *global deal* on climate protection called the flexible mechanisms; *joint implementation*, the *clean development mechanism* and in particular the *trade in emission allowances*. The trade in emission allowances does though require a functional market, something which exists only in certain territories, such as the EU, and then only to a limited extent. The rules for allocating allowances are often not clear. Procuring allowances should not become a substitute for structural reforms, neither on a national nor on a business level. For this reason, the German Bishops Conference suggests that at least 50% of the agreed rate of reduction must be achieved within the home country that means through a real chance in energy supply and not through buying additional emission rights.\(^\text{30}\)

“If the average cost of reducing emissions is less in a developing country than the price of emission allowances - something that is evidently the case - , then the developing countries will be able to profit from the sale of allowances. The profits from the trade in allowances could for example easily top the sums spent on developmental aid in Africa.”\(^\text{31}\) But despite all this, an ethical safeguard must be in place. In the trade in emission rights, the power of the market forces must not be bigger than the commitment to human rights. The major challenge will be to channel the flow of money from the northern hemisphere to local communities in the southern hemisphere and thereby ensure that benefits reach the right people.

3 Sustainability from a Christian point of view: a new definition of welfare

Climate change is an experience on the edge of society’s ecological, social and economic expectations. It is not just a challenge for political negotiation and technical innovation, but also a question of changing society’s values. “Faster, higher, further” has proved to be an inadequate ideal of progress. The situation demands individual and collective answers to genuinely ethical questions about the goals, limits and conditions of our lifestyle. How much is enough? What are the priorities in striving for progress? How can we ensure fair chances for people all over the globe? How can we ensure that long-term interests are properly represented in the democratic system?

In the search for answers to these questions, which are profoundly significant for the twin goals of fighting poverty and protecting the climate, churches and religious communities can make a substantial contribution. Their competence is especially based in the fact that they embed moral claims into a cosmology and a symbolic and ritual communication that has more chances to change the behaviour of men.\(^\text{32}\) The Catholic Church is the oldest global player on earth and the biggest global institution and network; therefore it has a specific duty and possibility to fight for globalization of solidarity. All religions define themselves through a long-term thinking. On this basis they have a very fundamental approach to the thinking of sustainability.

*Managing contingency: future ethics between fear and utopia*

The ethical and political principle of sustainability is a new definition of the conditions, limits and aims of progress; instead of a permanently increasing tally of goods and speeds, the safeguarding of the ecological, social and economical stability of human habitats has prime

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\(^\text{30}\) The German Bishops 2007, Nr. 54.
\(^\text{31}\) Edenhofer/Lotze-Campen 2008, 11.
place in the development of society and in political planning. Only wealth built on fewer resources, open to as many people as possible, is capable of providing justice.

Sustainability is not the byword for a social and economic program for conserving resources, but is an ethical and cultural reorientation. The contemporary paradigm of progress as unlimited growth needs to be replaced by a concept of development governed by the cycles of resources and the rhythms of nature. Long-term economic success needs to be measured by how well it is integrated into the whole, i.e. the economy of creation. The “Index of Sustainable Economic Welfare” can serve here as a means of measuring and checking progress, evaluating prosperity not merely in terms of the gross national product, but according to criteria of sustainable development.33

Our current model of progress is based on the nature philosophy of Newton's mechanics, which sees time and space as empty vessels, as something lacking both direction and structure, both a beginning and an end. Time and space are merely obstacles to be overcome. Our accelerated society, which is managing to use up millennia of resources at a breakneck speed and defines the pace of our lives by the maxim “everything, now, forever”, is a consequence of our interpretation of nature. Christian belief in creation leads us to search for alternatives to this view of nature, and can today base its nature philosophy on process theology.34 Sustainability needs new concepts of time and space and thus a cosmology which draws the consequences of Albert Einstein’s theory and the new theories of the development of complex adaptive systems.35

Sustainability is precaution for the future, its motivating hope not belief in everlasting progress, but the vision of a well-lead life within the limits of nature. In the Christian faith you can find such a kind of vision of life. It’s not founded in the idea that things are constantly improving and that humans will be able to build a perfect society, but in fact in the opposite, in the existential consciousness of the limits of humanity, which can be turned into hope if humans recognize that human life is a gift and moreover that everyone is dependent on the existence of a human community.

This ethos should serve as a corrective to some interpretations of sustainability which have become the main 21st century utopia of a global, eco-social and economic management. Without the profound insights of critical anthropology and nature philosophy, sustainability is a deeply ambivalent utopia. Seen from a theological perspective, sustainability demands a rejection of the utopia that politics and science will manage all problems. Even the agreements drawn up in Rio need a critical analysis of the deeply ambivalent promises which do not really clear speak about the limits of growth and paper over the cracks of these existential boundaries; we are promised a utopian, global management of ecological and social problems, while behind the scenes, the same old models and power networks are pursued. The talk is of sustainability, but what is really means is the traditional prosperity model, which, according to the trickle-down principle, makes the supply and accommodation of the poorest in society dependent of growth and surplus of the rich part of society. The experience of the last two decades shows that this is misleading promise. The rejection of the fossil-fuel-dependent economy and way of life are just the beginning.

The utopian excess of this model of sustainability, as it is currently communicated politically, is open to questions. The promise of the 2-degree Celsius target in climate politics is, in my
opinion, already unconvincing. CO\textsubscript{2} emissions are still increasing rapidly. The methane emissions from the melting permafrost have exceeded various worst-case-scenarios and we are well on the way to accelerating this process further.

Given this, and other pertinent facts, there has been return in sustainability debates to the apocalyptic visions of the 1970s. How can Christian theology, based on its gospel of good’s news negotiate a path between Scylla and Charybdis, between playing down the danger on the one hand and a discourse of fear on the other? Christian faith has nothing in common with a belief in progress. It is a hope which is quite different from the expectations of security and prosperity which we have got used to in the West. It is a way of managing contingency in the face of the ambivalence of progress and setbacks, security and risk, joy and suffering, life and death.

If we assume that managing contingency is a primary function of religion,\textsuperscript{36} then it is also here that we find the specific competence of theological ethics in the discourse on sustainability; managing contingency is vital to answer the postmodern breakdown of the belief in progress which is the starting point of debates on climate change and sustainability, without resorting to ecological apocalyptic scenarios or to a new version of the utopia of permanent growth.

Christian ethics of sustainability do not constitute a closed system of self-serving nature ontology, a guarantee of equality or a utopia of human progress; rather, they offer a form of seeking a way forward in the dialectics of progress and risk.

And this is exactly what Hans Jonas meant with his responsibility principle as a counter-argument to the principle of hope as formulated by Ernst Bloch. He demands an ethics of caution, the acceptance of limits and the “heuristics of fear”.\textsuperscript{37} Others talk about “intelligent self-restraint” (A. Honneth), for it is not the limits of nature, but the seemingly limitless desire of humanity in connection with the extreme rise in knowledge of its availability which are today the main threats to our future. The ability to enact self-restraint is a precondition for the redirection of technical and economic development to serve the wellbeing of humanity and creation.

\textit{The principle of sustainability: its place in Catholic social ethics}

Sustainability has not until now been a systematic part of Catholic social doctrine. The term sustainability does not appear in papal documents. There have indeed been impassioned calls for a “return to ecology” but these have not made it past the level of individual ethical virtues. On the level of political systems, there has been no systematic reflection on the relationship between environment and development. This is why I would like to postulate an extension of social principles - that along with personality, solidarity and subsidiarity, sustainability should be recognized as a fourth social principle. This is the core argument of my book in terms of the systematic aspects of Catholic social ethics.\textsuperscript{38}

Sustainability is the “missing link” between belief in creation and social discourses on climate change. Just as the Christian idea of charity was for centuries only understood ethically on the level of a personal virtue, and only became politically effective in connection with the solidarity principle, belief in creation needs a translation into ethical categories, so that it can

\textsuperscript{36} Lübbe 1998, 35-47; Luhmann 2000:

\textsuperscript{37} See Jonas 1994, 63f. The “heuristics of fear” as suggested by the religious philosopher need further differentiation in my opinion, in terms of society and of decision theory. We need different models to enable analysis and to manage different kinds of risk. Ortwin Renn illustrates this under the heading of risk maturity; Renn 2008; Vogt 2009,369-372.

\textsuperscript{38} Vogt 2009, 456-494.
become politically viable and justifiable, and clarify concrete consequences of organisational structures and economic decisions in the context of climate change. Belief in creation without sustainability is, in terms of structural and political ethics, a form of blindness. Sustainability without belief in creation (whether Christian or not) runs the risk of losing out on ethical depth.

A crucial factor for the acceptance of sustainability as one of the fundamental principles of Catholic social teaching is, at the end, that it summarizes effectively the social-ethical diagnosis of the “signes of the times” and gets to the heart of the associated challenges for society and the church. Sustainability is a synthesis of the social-ethical diagnosis of social question at the start of the 21st century, and on this basis also a barometer for chances of welfare and fairness in future development.

Sustainability shows up justice loopholes. It is the issue at the interface of all of the main questions about the future, often displaying surprising parallels and structural similarities to different dilemmas in different contexts. Sustainability opens the way for new analyses and solutions for the complex interplay between local and global phenomena. Such a central function can however only be realized by sustainability discourse when this submits to ongoing questioning of its boundaries. This is where theology can be a useful tool in opening up sustainability’s search for hope and meaning, which stretches beyond that which is achievable by human, societal or technical effort. Facing climate change means facing contingency which needs not only a political but also a cultural answer. The religious and spiritual understanding of sustainability opens a critical view of the risk of sustainability discourse closing itself off and mistaking its integral nature for an omnipotent power to solve. Sustainability needs an accompanying critical ideology, to be provided by philosophy, theology, sociology and cultural and historical studies.

Literature


Benedict XVI. (2009b): If you want to cultivate peace, protect creation. Message for the celebration of the world day of peace at 1th January 2010, Vatican


39 See the term „signs of the times” is a key for understanding the theology of the Second Assembly of Vatican (1962-1965); see Hünerrmann 2006 (On pages 122-145 you find there a reflection about “the cry of creation as a sign of our time”).


