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Fetishized nature or life-giving breath? Religion as Skill in Climate Change¹

Sigurd Bergmann²

Towards a new climate narrative and iconography

Anthropogenic climate change and unsustainable modes of production, consumption and lifestyles represent one of the most demanding challenges facing “Earth, our home” and humanity. Nevertheless, current discussions about mitigation and adaptation to climate change are dominated by propositions for technological and economic solutions. Even if an increasing strength in the mobilization of the populace (NGO’s, scientists, students and faith-based organisations) more or less successfully lifts the challenge on the agenda, [instead of accepting the limits of mechanistic and economy-oriented worldviews,] we need a deeper understanding of the human and cultural dimensions of anthropogenic climate and environmental change. Therefore religious belief, faith communities and spiritual commitment are highly needed in preparing the ground for what has been described as the necessary “great transformation”.¹ A transformation where local communities, nation states, companies and the world society as a whole respond to the tremendous challenge of mitigating dangerous climate change, and as this seems to be successful only in a limited sense, even develop modes of adapting to the unavoidable changes.

To achieve this, we need a new climate narrative and iconography which is supported by a broad alliance of local and translocal social forces, and religion has obviously a significant role to play in this mobilization. Faith communities and religious believers have so far regarded the challenge as a strong catalyser to pray, hope and act politically for global climate justice. Other themes such as biodiversity, migration, and water ethos appear in addition on the agenda.

One can only wonder what happens in a future of global warming of “hothouse earth”² where humans have let the genie of natural wild weather out of the bottle and where natural and anthropogenic forces unfold their power in synergy. How can religious forces mobilize their reconciling and peace-making skills in the steadily increasing conflicts? How will they respond to the already now continuously increasing suffering from climate-caused injustice and violence? Do they have something spiritually unique to contribute to the emerging green world ethos in the “Ecocene” beyond the so-called anthropocene, the age of the humans?³

In the following I will in a first step shortly depict several reasons why religion is a crucial driving force in the needed great transformation. In a second step I will offer a sketch of what, among many other potential antidotes, Christian ecotheology of the Life-Giving Spirit, resisting the powers of fetishization of money, technology and power, might have to offer in this context.

¹ Opening key note at the *Conference about Sustainability and Climate in Religion* at the Western Norway University of Applied Sciences, Bergen, 12-14 February 2020.

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Why religion?

The majority of the world's inhabitants are practicing religious believers. A sociocultural analysis of practices, values and worldviews with regard to climate change and the search for efficient responses to it must therefore necessarily include the religious dimension and its ethical, aesthetical and political ambiguities. Local populations are all too often regarded and treated merely as objects rather than subjects of power. It is not only a central demand to negotiate increasing geopolitical injustices but also to enhance and empower local people to become the central agents of change, even if this must take place in alliances with others.⁴ Climate change and the ecologic and social injustice that it accelerates represent not just a physical but mainly a cultural change, and therein a radical global threat to democracy, already under attack from many angles. It threatens all existing power constellations both in democracies and dictatorships. In this context, believers, religions, faith congregations and faith-based organisations produce and command unique and significant skills for creative responses to the demands of climatic change.

Before I offer you a short list of how religion matters in this sense, it is important to closely pay attention to two important insights. For the first, religions are not simply good and constructive in themselves. They are human and imply a normative ambiguity that can turn them from a constructive into a destructive force, which again can produce serious hinders to sustainable development and climate justice. For the second, religions are themselves essentially impacted by climatic change. Climate change takes place both geophysical and as a form of local and translocal cultural and religious change. If climate change affects culture it also has an impact on religion viewed as a cultural system, on its religious beliefs, its traditions and its practices.

On a general level climate change creates a painful spiritual dilemma for believers. In the theistic religions, this stance can be summarized in a conflict of belief in the good Creator and Creation on the one hand and the human capacity of structural sin and long-term global destruction on the other. How can one feel oneself at home in a good creation when humans themselves destroy this? How can God remain to be the Creator, Sustainer and Liberator, and how can human beings be understood as being in the image of God, if they destroy the gift of life? Is God absent with the suffering or present?

Not only human ecologies but also belief systems are threatened in the process of accelerating climatic change. To say it formulistically: Climate change changes religion, – how can religion bring about a change?⁵

Hopefully, faith-based organisations in different traditions have in the last years developed a rapidly increasing and intense activity with regard to climate change.⁶ In a similar way, strong constellations in the academy have developed dynamically.⁷ In addition, national and international bodies and institutions have paid increasing attention to religions responding to climate change.

Recent examples are the *Uppsala Earth Manifesto* (convened by the Archbishop of the Church of Sweden), Pope Francis's *Laudato Si'*, and the increasingly dynamic mobilisations at the United Nations (UNEP) and the European Union (recently).⁸ An important observation is that one in the field of religious responses to climate change can interestingly observe how the all too often fatally executed violent conflicts between belief confessions are replaced rather by multiple, highly diverse yet united in attitude and tone, common statements with regard to the urgency of global climate change. It is obvious that climate care and care for

the nature and life of the planet seems to awaken a latent potential to accelerate peaceful interfaith coalitions.⁹

In the following I will, [very shortly] list some of the thematic areas where one might expect constructive contributions to the local and global responses to the changing climate in the anthropocene.¹⁰ Why is religion significant?

- A first point is simply *demographic*. The majority of the world's inhabitants are practicing religious believers.
- Religions exert an influence on believers' *worldviews* or *cosmologies* which can be in harmony and even in conflict with other cultural and political influences. Beliefs can work constructively and destructively and one becomes more aware that global change also impacts, triggers and catalyses religious change.
- Many people are reached and affected by the *moral authority* wielded by religions. Religious arguments for *climate justice* are clearly growing and also interfaith collaborations are nurtured by the shared challenge of global change. Religions contribute qualitatively "to reconnect the human mind to the biosphere," and to accelerate the necessary "need for a mental change."¹¹
- Religions are commanding large *institutional and economic resources*. Education, access to transnational networks, leadership and also ownership of land and capital represent important resources that should not be underestimated. The role of religions in the processes of *divestment*¹² and search for *post-growth*¹³ economies seems to be crucial in this regard.
- The possibly most significant resource of religion lies in its potential to provide *social connectivity and collective action*. Common faith can be an important form of social cohesion, and the overlapping of religious communities and civil society are many. Instead of talking about so called social capital one should rather speak about religion as sociocultural *driving force* that enhances and deepens communicative and communitarian skills and processes.
- Religions can draw on their rich historical archives of a worldwide cultural memory and contribute with enormous creativity to the on-going processes of shaping alternative *climate narratives and iconographies*.
- A strong reason to explore religion with regard to climate change is to increase *the manifold of voices* and diverse perspectives about weather, climate, nature, and the "common future". Without such a plurality of approaches the "one-dimensional man" (H. Marcuse 1964) can scarcely find his way out of human-made self-going systems.
- Especially religion's response to the production of *suffering and violence*, its *passiological*¹⁴ skills seem to be highly relevant in times where anthropogenic impact on global and local life worlds produces radically new modes of suffering and at the same time continues and transforms conventional ones.
- Summarising all these qualities one might approach *religion as a skill of making-oneself-at-home, Beheimatung*, in a world of climate driven homelessness and existential placelessness. Religion hereby serves as a skill of orientation, perception and action in a complex environment. Current technically and economically driven mobilities seem to catalyse an increasing homelessness in the on-going globalization which challenges and changes also religious modes of making-oneself-at-home.¹⁵ On-going climatic change accelerates this development even more and challenges religious belief systems to respond to dangerous

environmental change that changes environments as well as cultures and religions. Climatic change seems in such a view to appear as a change of culture and religion as much as it represents a change of the natural earth system. No matter where and when, the role of religions remains crucial also in the age of the anthropocene, alive at Earth, our common home, and in our common futures.

Another interesting point is that one can wonder if and how such new alternative narratives and iconographies might also bridge the gap between scientists on the one side and local populations and citizens in their life worlds on the other. Contemporary discussions often suffer from a fatal lack of political and historical consciousness and a lack of including the future, or better *different futures*, in their narrative and iconography. While scientists at present mainly debate about the beginning of the so-called Anthropocene, and its main reasons and driving forces, the future appears more general. While some imagine it as an apocalyptic cosmic disaster others regard it as a new promising arena for socio-engineering. The challenge in contrast is not to fall in either of these gaps, but to imagine and negotiate the *shared* future,¹⁶ a just and sustainable future that can be shared equally by all world citizens¹⁷ and in freedom by all living beings. Not only Fridays for future but the whole week should be dedicated to our shared future.

Fetishized nature or life-giving breath?

How can – among many other religious responses – Christian ecotheology contribute to this process¹⁸? In many ways of course, as you can mine deeper in the dynamic field of studies in religion and the environment and ecotheology developing on all continents of the earth. I would like to offer you a sketch of what faith in the Trinity's Holy Spirit as a resistance and overcoming of the fetishization of money, power and technology might imply.

Modern technology is embedded in a cultural system of innovation for exchange processes which are steered by economical driving forces. Modern monetary systems of exchange presuppose an alienating split, and they operate through a commodification of things that are treated as lifeless objects on the one side and an adoration of money as the highest object with an intrinsic value on the other.

While traditional animism departed from the gift of animated life in a larger relational system of interconnections between (personal) things and humans, fetishism moves the skill to animate to the human him/herself. Fetishism makes it possible to decontextualize and delocalize objects, natural objects as well as artefacts. And it reconnects them anew across local and historical borders. Oil, for example, emerging from the earth's long natural history can be turned into a commodity and traded and transported trans-locally through money and technology. African lands can be cultivated by local farmers who turn their fruits and work into objects managed by Chinese land-owners who transfer profits and products to other parts of the world, enriching their bank accounts but draining the land and spoiling the population's conditions for self-subsistence.

Modernity builds, as Karl Marx has shown clearly, on the commoditised relations between humans and things, including the alienating split of human workers and the products of their labour. For Marx, fetishism was "the religion of sensuous appetites".¹⁹ This is an even stronger reason for its relevance as theme for critical Christian theology.

If relations between humans and objects are fetishized, a hierarchy of relations is constructed wherein asymmetrical trans-local processes of exchange are defined and

managed through the fetishization of money and commodities. Value is attributed to lifeless money, things, and machines in a fetishizing way. All these mystify, [as Swedish anthropologist Alf Hornborg shows,] unequal processes of exchange where local, historical and individual identities are destroyed for the sake of a decontextualized system of asymmetrical and de-localized relations. Both technology and monetarism thus become immune to political critique.²⁰ Falsely, they are regarded as value-neutral entities which are necessary and vital for our modern life.²¹

While fetishization is a human process that transforms an unanimated being into an animated one, which is attributed with power over others in a larger cultural system of perceptions, beliefs and practices, classical faith in the Holy Spirit is not situated in a *man*-made environment but in a world characterised by divine gifts and God-giveness. While a fetish receives its “life” through the action of man, the all-embracing Spirit breathes life. Life is a gift from the Spirit.

Fetishism and faith in the Spirit, following the older paths of animism, perform along contradictory codes. While the fetish is enchanted by humans, the created life is breathed by the Holy One. When she sends her “life-giving breath, they are created” (Psalm 104:30). While the fetish works as an instrument for the power of the one over the other, the life-giving Spirit embraces all in one common world and history and nevertheless respects the face of every individual identity. While fetishism turns the given nature into a lifeless world where only the useful is animated, traditional animism and Christian pneumatology perceive the intrinsic value of all beings in their specific environments. While fetishism aggravates spatial and environmental injustices, faith in the Holy Spirit reveals the perfect, just and true community of the Trinity and it opens a path to walk towards the (not yet seen) “land that I will show you” (Gen. 12:1). A pneumatology, inspired by animism, enhances the circles of life, which indigenous theologians have helped us to recognise.

The challenge to an ecological pneumatology, which wants to drink from its own classical wells and respect its synergies with traditional animism in the history of mission, is to resist the authority of life-threatening animations and to overcome the power of fetishization. Faith in the Holy Spirit as an all-embracing life giving and liberating movement can break down belief systems where fetishized commodities, money and technologies turn the gifts of life into instruments for dominion. In such an analytical horizon anthropogenic climatic change represents nothing more than the outermost consequence of fetishization as a cardinal human sin: the disenchantment of sacred earth and life as a gift of the Spirit and the unjust fragmentation of its life forms and artefacts into tools for power *over* each other. In the lens of a Christian eco-pneumatology such a view allows us to perceive the Holy Spirit at work in the struggle of fetishized and animated life forms in our manifold environments, a work that generates power *with* each other.

The most violent consequence of fetishism, as it is practiced in capitalism, is the reduction of the other to a commodity. When poor global citizens in the South are excluded from human dignity, value and rights which are taken for granted among the rich of the North, the Spirit who dwells with the other is violated. When natural life processes are treated as resources for the accumulation of capital, for obtaining wealth and power by some, the Spirit, who embraces all, and the Creator, who bestows rain and sunshine on all, is offended. When human skills, such as the artistic and innovative capacity to produce artefacts, are abused for the animation of things and machines in a fetishized way so that their function and intention is blurred, the creator Spirit is humiliated.

In such a context, pneumatology must necessarily resist the fetishizing commodification of the other, where the other includes human as well as non-human neighbours. Christian pneumatology, fertilized through its classical roots, has an enormous and still not yet fully exhausted potential to contribute to the emergence of an animistic driving force that can resist and overcome the dominant world system of fetishization. Faith in the Holy Spirit as the life-giving breath of the world to come – a world beyond the power of the fetishes – allows the perception of our environment as a space populated by a manifold of created spiritual beings, a perception that is open for its own transformation towards a new creation.

The history of Christianity shows that the doctrine of the Spirit has been revitalized in times of social crisis; there is no doubt that the contemporary state of modernity again offers such a critical threshold, an *ecological kairos*. As a crucial pathology in our perception of the environment, a reflection and revisiting of animism can assist our striving for an alternative future, one that we may have in common for many “others”.

If the Holy Spirit reveals the face of the Trinitarian Creator on earth, she also performs in synergy with us as the one who brings the new world to come. As a liberating movement she takes place today in the struggle against fetishist idolatry at those places on the planet where creatures groan and suffer from environmental and spatial injustice fuelled by the sin of modern fetishism.

If God, who is humiliated through such sin, does not turn his/her face away, the challenge to believers and faith communities today must be to become aware about and move to the specific places where the inhabitation of the Spirit is evident and to act in synergy with the spiritual forces of her life-giving and liberating space. The old prayer *Come Holy Spirit come!* remains central in all forms of liturgy, and it sounds in such a critical context with a new cosmic tenor. The central question to Christian and other believers then is: where does the Life-Giving Spirit take place here and now in the violence of dangerous-climatic-and-environmental change?

Notes

¹ Uwe Schneidewind, *Die Große Transformation: Eine Einführung in die Kunst des gesellschaftlichen Wandels*, Frankfurt am Main, 2018.

² Cf. Will Steffen et al, “Trajectories of the Earth System in the Anthropocene”, *PNAS* August 14, 2018, 115 (33), 8252–8259.

³ On the “ecocene” see Sigurd Bergmann, *Weather, Religion, and Climate Change*, London and New York: Routledge 2020, chapter 8, and on the term see Arjen E.J. Wals, Joseph Weakland, and Peter Blaze Corcoran, “Preparing for the Ecocene: Envisioning futures for environmental and sustainability education,” *Japanese Journal of Environmental Education* 26, 4, 2017, 71-76.

⁴ Cf. Michael S. Northcott, *A Moral Climate: The Ethics of Global Warming*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd 2007, 15.

⁵ Sigurd Bergmann, “Climate Change Changes Religion: Space, Spirit, Ritual, Technology – through a Theological Lens”, *Studia Theologica* 63, 2, 2009, 98-118.

⁶ Veldman, R.G., Szasz, A., Haluza-DeLay, R. (eds.), *How the World’s Religions are Responding to Climate Change*. London and New York: Routledge 2014. Cf. D. Gerten and S. Bergmann (eds.), *Religion in Environmental and Climate Change: Suffering, Values, Lifestyles*, London and New York: Continuum 2012, and S. Bergmann and D. Gerten (eds.), *Religion and Dangerous Environmental Change: Transdisciplinary Perspectives on the Ethics of Climate and Sustainability*, (Studies in Religion and the Environment, Vol. 2.) Berlin: LIT 2010. For a detailed

survey see the recently published: Ernst M. Conradie and Hilda P. Koster (eds.), *T&T Clark Handbook of Christian Theology and Climate Change*, London and New York: Bloomsbury 2019.

⁷ <http://fore.yale.edu>, <https://www.religion-environment.com>, <https://www.issrnc.org>, <http://www.arcworld.org>, <http://www.ifees.org.uk>, <https://www.carsoncenter.uni-muenchen.de>.

⁸ *Hope for the Future! The Uppsala Interfaith Climate Manifesto 2008, Faith Traditions Addressing Global Warming*: https://www.svenskakyrkan.se/filer/Manifesto_Uppsala_2008_eng.pdf, *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis' encyclical on the environment and human ecology: <<https://laudatosi.com/watch>>, United Nations Environment Programme 2016: <https://www.unenvironment.org/resources/report/environment-religion-and-culture-context-2030-agenda-sustainable-development>, *The EU and faith-based organisations in development and humanitarian aid*, 2017: [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2017/608800/EPRS_BRI\(2017\)608800_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2017/608800/EPRS_BRI(2017)608800_EN.pdf). Some more examples can be mentioned. Muslims have created a global network of exchange: *Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences (IFEES)*, <http://ifees.org.uk>. Many local church leaders and synods, such as the German Protestant Church (EKD), have agreed on declarations about the radical challenge of climate change. International ecumenical institutions such as the World Council of Churches have contributed to the discourse and mobilised believers, mainly in the poor world regions. See *World Council of Churches (WCC), The Atmosphere as Global Commons: Responsible Caring and Equitable Sharing, 2000*: <http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/jpc/cop6-e.html>. Since 2001 a working group for climate issues works intensively in the “European Churches Environmental Network (ECEN)“, and focuses especially on climate justice: <http://www.ecen.org/cms/index.php?page=climatechange>. The Lutheran World Federation (LWF) has run a process for to enhance local churches on all continents to develop a pastoral theology for adaptation. See Karen L. Bloomquist with Rolita Machila (eds.), *God, Creation and Climate Change: A resource for reflection and discussion*, Geneva: Lutheran World Federation 2009, cf. <http://www.lutheranworld.org/News/LWI/EN/2300.EN.html>.

Buddhists from several world regions have addressed world leaders in 2015: *Buddhist Climate Change Statement to World Leaders*: <http://gbccc.org>.

⁹ Cf. the strong environmental activities of *Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC)*, *World Alliance of Religions*, *Religions for Peace*, *Parliament of the World's Religions*.

¹⁰ Veldman et al. consider four reasons that produce factors that “help religions in general engage with climate change” (Veldman et al. 2014, op.cit., 309). For further driving forces see Sigurd Bergmann, “Religion at work within climatic change: Eight perceptions about its where and how,” in: Celia Deane-Drummond, Sigurd Bergmann, and Markus Vogt (eds.), *Religion in the Anthropocene: Transdisciplinary Perspectives*, Eugene OR: Wipf & Stock 2017, 67-84.

¹¹ Cf. the plea of the Stockholm Resilience Centre: “To reconnect the human mind to the biosphere, there’s the need for a mental change.” <http://www.stockholmresilience.org/21/research/research-news/2-19-2015-time-to-reconnect-to-the-biosphere.html>.

¹² Cf. the UNEP’s initiative in 2015: <http://unepinquiry.org/event/global-divestment-conference-in-paris-highlight-opportunities-for-a-sustainable-financial-system/>.

¹³ On the dynamically evolving discourse about de-growth and post-growth see: @@

¹⁴ Passiology here aims at the reflection of suffering, in a human as well as in a wider ecological sense. In Christian theology Hans Urs von Balthasar uses the term (once) in his *Explorations in Theology* (Vol. 1), though exclusively in a Trinitarian sense for the specific self-estranging suffering of the Son and the Father in the divine process of redemption. Nevertheless the history of Christianity offers a rich diversity of narrative, iconographic and practical expressions of the entanglement of the suffering God and the sighing and suffering creation, where already at Golgotha earth and weather were partaking in the crucifixion of God’s son. Luther’s famous demand in his theology of the cross in the Heidelberg disputation plows the ground for an ecological theology of liberation of the Holy Spirit co-suffering with the creatures and giving life to a new world to come. “He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross. A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross calls the things what it actually is.” (Luther 1518, 361f.). The question about suffering and what skills faith might be able to offer in contexts of dangerous environmental change still represents a lacuna: “How people can cope with large-scale suffering and, ultimately, death as a consequence of climate change (due to short-term extreme events such as floods and gradual processes such as rising sea levels or repeated droughts) is a largely unexplored domain of research.” (Gerten and Bergmann 2012, op. cit. note 6, 3f.)

¹⁵ Cf. Sigurd Bergmann, *Religion, Space & the Environment*, London and New York: Routledge 2014, 28, and Juhani Pallasmaa, “Existential Homelessness – Placelessness and Nostalgia in the Age of Mobility”, in: Sigurd

Bergmann and Tore Sager (eds.), *The Ethics of Mobilities: Rethinking Place, Exclusion, Freedom and Environment*, Aldershot: Ashgate 2008, 143–156.

¹⁶ On the significance of “shared future” in the context of “making oneself at home in the future” see Scott and Rodwell in their introductory chapter “Dialogues of place and belonging,” p. 9, in: John Rodwell, Peter Manley Scott (eds.), *At Home in the Future: Place & Belonging in a Changing Europe*, (Studies in Religion and the Environment 11), Berlin: LIT 2016.

¹⁷ For the concept of global citizenship see Ulrich Beck (ed.), *Politik der Globalisierung*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1998, 61-66.

¹⁸ Cf. on the following Sigurd Bergmann, “Fetishism Revisited: In the Animistic Lens of Ecopneumatology”, *Journal of Reformed Theology* 6 (2012): 195–215, and “Anden, som ger liv – motmakt till fetischismen”, *Kirke & Kultur* 3/2012, 269-277.

¹⁹ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels. *On Religion*, Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1982, 22.

²⁰ Alf Hornborg, “Submitting to Objects: Fetishism, Dissociation, and the Cultural Foundations of Capitalism”, in: Graham Harvey (ed.), *The Handbook of Contemporary Animism*, Durham: Acumen 2013, 244-259.

²¹ One of the many fatal consequences of such a fetishization can be studied in the gap between welfare and social politics on the one side and environmental-and-climate-politics on the other, where both are structurally disentangled so that classical welfare is made dependant on unsustainable modes of production and national income. In detail see Koch’s well-grounded plea for *sustainable welfare* within a *postgrowth* economy: Max Koch, “The state in the transformation to a sustainable postgrowth economy”, *Environmental Politics* 29, 1, 2020, 115-133, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2019.1684738>.