

Christian Climate Activism: The Wisdom of Urgency “In-Between”

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Facing the human-made climate crisis of the Anthropocene, a new generation of activism emerged with resonance in Christian communities. The paper reflects from a German background the divide of mere individual and mere collective solutions and addresses the in-between of various levels of action and engagement in the Global North. Three local climate movements are described with regard to their Christian entanglement like Last Generation supporter Jesuit Jörg Alt or Christian grassroots activism against coalmining. The last part of the paper is about discovering the theological wisdom of urgency of being in-between. On the one hand, there are many opportunities for theological involvement with ecological and social transformation. On the other hand, there is an open discussion about how it should be done: by fostering at least green capitalism, or by more radical changes of Being-in-the-world toward interconnectedness with non-human agency and critique of Christian anthropocentrism and sovereignty. Even Practical Theology should be “staying with the trouble” (Donna Haraway).

Introduction

The ecological footprint shows how damaging an action is to the climate: A flight from Frankfurt to Seoul and back emits 2.8 tons of carbon dioxide per person—that’s over four times as much as a person should emit in an entire year. Are we going to fly to the International Academy of Practical Theology (IAPT) conference in Seoul or not?

The invention of the idea that everyone should be able to calculate the climate impact of their own actions can be traced back to the oil company BP (cf. Kaufman 2020). The company’s interest is to shift the responsibility for the destruction of the planet onto individuals: If you (and many others with you) had not flown to Seoul, the world would look different today!

The argumentation follows a classical theological framework about sin and is thus compatible with religious narratives: Every human being commits minor and major (climate) sins and can soothe their bad conscience by compensating for them. A few

centuries ago, this theological framework would have been called “indulgence.” Collectively it is not enough at all, as can currently be observed: This text is being written while the outside temperature in Tübingen (Germany) is 37 degrees, following some of the hottest days worldwide since the beginning of weather records (cf. Roeloffs 2023). The year 2023 turned out to be the hottest globally since records began (cf. Umweltbundesamt 2024).

This development demonstrates that the world has not yet found a solution to the climate crisis, and that the shift of responsibility to individuals, supported by religious motives, only benefits the oil companies. Does practical theology have to, or can it, react to this? If so, how?

In this article we outline a possible approach, situated in a German and Catholic theological context. In a first step we explore how the dichotomy between individual and collective could be overcome; in a second step we examine the practice of climate activism in Germany; in a third step we propose a theological reading of climate activism.





1. What (not) to Do? The Individual, the Collective, and the In-Between

There are generally two approaches to solving the climate crisis.

The first approach is the Individual Approach, which asserts that everyone must change their personal lifestyle. According to this view, in order to avoid contributing carbon emissions, no one should fly from Frankfurt to Seoul for an IAPT conference. However, this approach denies the fact that we live within a system that makes ecological action both very difficult and expensive. For example, organic food is more expensive than conventionally produced food; electric cars are pricier than combustion engine cars, and for many products we as consumers are not even aware of the carbon footprint. Thus, focusing on individual actions is insufficient to address the problem.

The second approach calls for policymakers to change the entire system. This is the Collective Approach. Since none of the participants at the IAPT conference hold political power to implement the changes needed to limit global warming, one could argue that this conversation is not needed, nor are many conversations preceded by a smaller or larger amount of emitted carbon dioxide. This approach forgets that change never occurs without pioneers. Looking at the problem solely collectively doesn't work either.

Climate activist Greta Thunberg says, "The answer to the question of whether we should focus on individual or systemic change is yes, absolutely. You can't have one without the other. We need both" (Thunberg 2022a, 356). Perhaps we need not only both, but also something different that emerges from in-between the individual approach and the collective approach. What might this be? How could the dichotomy between the individual and the collective be overcome to combat global warming more effectively?

But isn't this rather a topic for the natural sciences and maybe for the social sciences? What does practical theology have to do with it? According to Rainer Bucher, pastoral theologian emeritus at the University of Graz, practical theology seeks to engage in "the creative confrontation of the Gospel with current individual and collective existence" (Bucher 2010, 20). Given that the climate crisis is recognized as probably the most existential of all problems of this world, practical theologians must deal with it. On

one hand, this aligns with the content tradition of the discipline; for example, through the option for the suffering people in poverty are least to blame for global warming (cf. Thunberg 2022b, 4), but suffer the most from its consequences. On the other hand, it necessitates unlearning the Christian "tragedy and illusion of our belief in human and divine sovereignty" (LaMothe 2022, 1), which has brought us into this mess in the first place.

A Time before Global Warming

But now let us return to the question of the Western dichotomy between the individual and the collective: How did this come about in the first place? To clarify this, it is helpful to travel back several centuries to a time prior to global warming and, above all, before individualization.

During that period, it was clear that sons would follow their fathers. If your father was a farmer, you would become a farmer. Daughters followed—in a similar manner—their mothers. Their "profession" was to be mothers and housewives. Almost every child was predetermined at birth regarding their future occupation. Hartmut Rosa describes: "For example, as far as the life cycles of families as economic units or 'households' are concerned, the ideal-typical family structures in agrarian societies tended to be stable over a long chain of generations: the change of generations left the basic structures untouched and, as it were, only replaced the individual position holders" (Rosa 2016, 179). In such a world, talents were not considered decisive, and people—at least from today's perspective—could not be perceived as individuals. Simultaneously, the individual has a high responsibility for his or her own survival. If you don't go to the fields, you have nothing to eat. *Others* were responsible for political processes and the solution of overall social problems (because there was often not even a right to vote, but monarchs or higher classes decided on politics). This changed culturally in the Renaissance (cf. Dinzelbacher 2008, 34) and was further transformed by Industrialization for the broader population. That is how the climate crisis begins—continuing to intensify until today (cf. Umweltbundesamt 2023; cf. Rahmstorf 2017).

Sociologist Jürgen Gerhards observes a development in Western societies in the 1960s: "The rights and claims to inclusion of the laity [not in the ecclesiastical sense, M.S. & S.L.] have increased in relation to authority roles in almost all areas, the reduc-

tion to a rather selective role assignment has softened, citizens are speaking out as persons, an uprising of the public has taken place” (Gerhards 2001, 167). Gerhards cites satisfaction of material needs and a long period of peace as reasons for this social change (cf. Gerhards 2001, 180). The effects of this “uprising,” through which customary social patterns were broken, would probably be perceived by many people today as fundamentally positive. As an individual I gain greater freedom—where I live, what I do for work, whom I marry (or if I marry at all): these are all my personal decisions—but at the same time there is pressure to take responsibility for my life. What is crucial for us today is that this change dissolves the separation between the sphere of the individual and the sphere of the collective: There are no longer those on the political stage who decide and just the audience—but these spheres are mixing: School students become a political factor.

2. Glue with a Clue: Climate Activism in a German Context and Its Christian Resources

In the following section we examine climate justice activism in Germany and its Christian resources more closely. First, we recall three important movements in Germany.

a) *FFF*: Since Greta Thunberg started her “School Strike for Climate” in 2018, the “Fridays-for-Future”-movement (FFF) had a significant impact in Germany, too. Large networks—like “Parents for Future” or “Scientists for Future”—emerged. They could be characterized by four aspects: First, the protest is rooted in what is sometimes described as climate fear, or genuine worries about the future of the planet and the future of the young generation. Second, these concerns are based in scientific research: “Say the Truth” and “Listen to Science” (Soßdorf and Burgi 2022) are fundamental. Like empirical studies say, “they can indeed be called alternative science communicators,” because they “use scientific knowledge to back their claims and integrate this knowledge into their work as activists” (Soßdorf and Burgi 2022, 12). Third, the demands of FFF are neither utopian nor against the state. In contrary, they want the government to comply with the Paris Climate Protection Agreement and the German resolutions. Fourth, to achieve these requirements, FFF are using a weak form of civil disobedience like “school strike” and

legal protest events to mobilize the power of civil society.

b) *Coalmining and Lützerath*: For many years there has been a more specific form of protest the last German coal mining areas in the Rhineland—a quite symbolic struggle against the extractivist capitalism “at home.” The Rhineland has historically been the largest area of brown coal mining and the largest source of carbon dioxide emissions in Europe. At the beginning of 2023, the small village Lützerath has become quite famous. This old village has been torn down because the existing coal mine is to be extended for one last time.

Many climate activist movements occupied Lützerath to protest against the burning the 280 million tons of brown coal under Lützerath: “Keep the coal in the ground,” otherwise Germany will fail to meet its climate targets. At the same time the situation was complicated, because it was the government, including the Green Party, who made a deal to stop coal mining in 2038 while permitting continuing extraction in the interim.

The primary form of protest was occupying the territory. Ethnographer Stine Krøijer calls this kind of “living with trees” a “Slow Activism,” a new form of “sustainable activism” by “immersing oneself in the forest and developing and assembling these more-than-human subjectivities that are following a different temporal rhythm” (Krøijer 2019, 170). Krøijer distinguishes this kind of “experimenting with alternative, sustainable livelihoods” in nature from the more heroic activism “to stop the expansion of lignite mining” (Krøijer 2019, 166) like the more apocalyptic agency of the Last Generation today.

c) *The Last Generation*: The Last Generation is a group of climate activists advocating for a more radical set of nonviolent methods, including illegal practices of civil resistance. They choose their name to signal that the planet is approaching climate tipping points, referring to a tweet of Barack Obama in 2014: “We are the first generation to feel the effect of climate change and the last generation who can do something about it.”

The initial action was a hunger strike of a small group in Berlin’s government district a few weeks before the German elections in 2021 (Eichler, Jeschke and Alt 2023, 68). After that, the group used further dramatic methods of civil disobedience. In Potsdam, they threw mashed potatoes onto a Monet painting. None of the artworks they attacked were damaged. In 2022, the group performed 276 road blockades in Germany, intensifying in 2023, espe-



cially in Berlin. In Germany they are called “Climate Gluers” because they glue themselves to the road. These street sit-ins have resulted in some drivers lashing out. Countless social media videos show outraged drivers screaming at activists or using force to remove them from the streets. The activists themselves are trained in remaining calm and explaining their climate motivation (reaching the 1.5-degree target) in a stoic and almost ascetic manner. Many reports observe this as nearly religious practices in a secular society, noting the apocalyptic worldview and the heroic actions, which could provoke martyrdom. While their actions get intense public attention, they also polarize. In 2023, the urgent actions of the German climate movement were answered by an increasing criminalization of the acts by the authorities. Non-violent protest was recognized by the criminal authorities as a threat to public safety or even as a formation of a criminal organization. In May, raids on the Last Generation took place and several activists were sentenced to prison terms. In February 2024, the group announced an end to the road blockades. Since the beginning of 2025, they no longer call themselves the Last Generation, but the New Generation.

Christian and Theological Support and Engagement

One of the most popular Catholic supporters of climate activism is Jesuit Fr. Jörg Alt. He has known the leading young people of Last Generation for a long time (cf. Eichler, Jeschke and Alt 2023). Nevertheless, he disagreed until recently with the radical strategies of civil resistance like highway-blockades and gluing themselves to the streets. But his perspective has since changed. Jörg Alt says a letter of Jesuit colleagues from the Global South changed his mind:

Although we in Sub-Saharan Africa account for only a tiny fraction of global greenhouse gas emissions, we are among the countries most affected by the climate crisis [...]. The climate crisis on this continent is already measured in lives lost, communities abandoned, and families malnourished; all the result of consumption patterns we have neither contributed to nor benefited from. Germany and the European Union must take urgent action. Our lives depend on it. The young people blocking German roads today are standing up for us. We hope that the German public and government will follow suit.

Fr. Charles Chilufya S.J., Director Jesuit Conference of Africa and Madagascar, Justice and Ecology Office (Eichler, Jeschke and Alt 2023, 110).

In October 2022, Jörg Alt glued himself onto a road in central Munich, collaborating with other activist scholars from university (“Scientist Rebellion”), and thus blocking traffic for several hours. Alt explained that he has been engaged with social and climate justice for thirty years—beginning with the ecumenical “Conciliar Process for Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation”—but as the situation gets worse and time falls short one has to act with more insistence. Pope Francis in his encyclical *Laudate Deum* acknowledges “the actions of groups negatively portrayed as ‘radicalized’ [...] But in reality, they are filling a space left empty by society as a whole, which ought to exercise a healthy ‘pressure’, since every family ought to realize that the future of their children is at stake” (*Laudate Deum* 58).

In a similar way, Christians inspired by the Political Theology of Johann B. Metz or Dorothee Sölle have become involved in the networks against further coal mining. Movements like “Keep the church in the Village” and “Church at the Abyss” have emerged. Benedikt Kern, one of the Catholic activists rooted in liberation theology, explains:

People are involved for a variety of reasons: they want to preserve the churches as cultural assets, but they also want to stand up for the integrity of creation and for global climate justice, i. e., the living conditions of future generations and of people living in different parts of the world. [...] A Christian perspective within the climate justice movement is not as self-evident today as it used to be in the peace movement or the anti-nuclear movement, in which decidedly Christian actors have always played a role. At the same time, Christians do participate in the climate justice movement, even if they are not necessarily visible as such in it (Kern 2022, 14).

In her qualitative empirical master’s thesis, Katharina Jauch conducted interviews with three Christian activists—each representing one of the three movements previously mentioned—including Jörg Alt (Jauch 2023). Their crucial finding is: “Hope comes from action.” Theological arguments are found to be nearly irrelevant, while religious practices such as carrying a cross as symbol of hope and solidarity or political night prayers in the tradition of Dorothee Sölle are experienced as a source of power. The Church as institution seems as absent as academic theology, except some open letters and petitions from and with theologians. Julia Blanc reached a similar conclusion in her qualitative research on ecological engagement in churches (Germany and Switzerland): “The enviro-ethical debate [...] seems to have little effect on environmental engagement”

(Blanc 2023, 127). Even there the “interviewees were very careful not to use religious speech when speaking about their engagement in the first place” (Blanc 2023, 124).

What can also be observed is a gap between the spiritual resources in current Christian climate activism that are mostly absent or rooted in traditional political theology or ecological ethics from the twentieth century and the Planetary Turn of Anthropocene/Capitalocene in theory (cf. Elias and Moraru 2015; Chakrabarty 2021). The de-anthropocentric perspective and a symmetric entanglement of human and more-than-human agency (Latour 1993) still has little impact on German practice-based eco-theology. As Stine Krøijer discovered, many activists that had occupied the threatened forests by living there and dwelling in trees show “a careful avoidance of religious and spiritual vocabulary to describe their experiences and political projects as well as a deliberate attention on steering clear of the tree symbolism and romanticism of the Third Reich” (Krøijer 2019, 167). They would not want to be accused of naïve or reactionary animism (Laack 2020). However, this does not mean that spiritual or religious practice was not present. Instead, there is a need for further research on the relation between academics and activism.

By now, what can practical theology learn from the activism of the Last Generation or from the FFF movement founded by Greta Thunberg? Thunberg states about her protest: “When I talk about individual action, I mean that we as individuals should use our voice and all the platforms available to us to become activists and communicate the urgency of the situation to the people around us” (Thunberg 2022a, 359).

3. The Wisdom of Urgency “In-Between”

Overcoming the dichotomy of individual and collective

Herein lies a clue as to how the dichotomy of individual and collective can be overcome: Individual action derives its value from generating maximum pressure on those individuals who hold decision-making power for the collective. Thus, individual action against the climate crisis should be directed toward the collective changes that are urgently needed. Stuart Capstick and Lorraine Whitmarsh write:

Those who focus attention on two extremes—individual and systemic—overlook the vast realm in between. Yet it is in this realm that we are able to interact with people in our society and contribute to change by helping to shape societal expectations and create shared realities (Capstick and Whitmarsh 2022, 360).

This then requires acknowledging that activities in this area remain mostly imperfect. For instance, it may be considered reasonable to fly from Frankfurt to Seoul for a conference to talk about these problems, even if carbon dioxide has to be emitted to do so; but it can also be viewed differently.

The form in which action should be taken in the space between the individual and the system can and must be debated. School strikes like Fridays for Future were one attempt, street blockades another. That politicians can react quickly to pressure to act is a fact. Germany, for example, succeeded in reducing gas imports from Russia to zero within half a year after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, despite its great dependence on it in the last decades (cf. Sabin 2023). Consequently, the goal of climate activism must be to generate a similarly high level of civil society pressure on policymakers resulting in short-term changes in action, not (as has often been the case to date) merely in long-term target agreements.

It should be noted that “individual” and “collective” do not always have to mean the same thing. Individuals can join forces and become active together (as a collective). The addressed collective, in turn, does not necessarily have to be the nation-state; it can just as easily be a region, a city, a diocese or a parish, each of which can become active as an actor at another level. One could imagine, for example, that a parish finds a way to become climate neutral and from that point on exerts pressure on the diocese to encourage such an approach in other parishes.

There are numerous opportunities for practical theological research projects at the interface with the natural sciences and social sciences: What theological explosive power lies in the injustices that the consequences of global warming entail, especially for people in poverty? What steps must a parish take to become climate neutral? In answering these questions, the approaches taken by representatives of the field may be very different, or entirely different questions may be raised.

The Wisdom of Rupture and Interconnectedness

In conclusion, we now want to examine the narratives and patterns within climate activism. The cli-



mate justice movement is sometimes explicitly framed as an apocalyptic cause. It's all about forcing the required ruptures of a global Western system that destroys the earth. Time is short—and day-by-day time is growing shorter to stop reaching tipping points of no return. This is why apocalyptic thought is so nearby in a theology of climate activism, especially as political theology. Recall the German political theologian Johann B. Metz and his emphasis in his "Thesis on Apocalypics" (cf. Metz 1980): Religion serves as interruption; it is apocalyptic rupture in the flow of time by seeing and remembering the cry of the victims and their suffering.

Climate change is not only unjust in destroying non-human life and biodiversity, but it's also an aspect of global injustice. Global South, which has contributed least to global warming, is worst affected by it. Most responsible are people in the Global North with consumption-driven lifestyles and an economic system predicated on growth and extractivism. And both, Stefan Silber points it out, "responsibilities and sufferings entertain relationships with racialized, gender, and postcolonial issues. Hence, climate injustice must be approached by interdisciplinary and intersectional means" (Silber 2022, 249).

The German climate movement develops an apocalyptic approach, because it's us in the Global North who have to interrupt our imperial lifestyles and the fossil and extractivist economic system, including the scientific and religious narratives that justify them (cf. Taxacher 2022). But what interruption toward what kind of different conditions of life? The most common answer is the even difficult transformation toward Green Capitalism. But is it wise to interrupt the destructive dynamics with countermeasures from our same modern and Western mainframe? While many hope this approach can guide the whole society toward transformation, some are worried this could not be sufficient. "The analytical rationality of the West caused this crisis but is unable to deal with it. Because of this, it is necessary for Western thought to listen to alternative discourses, life praxes, resistance, and wisdom, and accept their criticisms" (Silber 2022, 250). That's what the IAPT Conference in Seoul suggested, "to call on sources of practical theology beyond the bound of the West—and logos-centered theological traditions. In reconnecting the relationship between the earth and the human, can we find different frameworks in traditions of diverse localities to build practical theology?" (<https://www.ia-practicaltheology.org/conferences/2023-seoul/>).

A younger generation of theological scholars in Germany like Julia Enxing are critically analyzing how the Christian tradition itself has to change. Calling humans "crown of the creation" and having incarnation in the human Jesus Christ as a core belief call for a strong critique of anthropocentric power relations. As Enxing points out, even the stewardship model, used in the encyclical *Laudato Si* (2015) and Catholic ecological thought, seems too limited: It installs the humans as the good and the caring "lords of creation." But is the Kingdom of God not about getting rid of lords and patronizing power relations? "If the lord mutates into a shepherd or a steward, this is still a long way from achieving a change in thinking. If creation theology was to focus not on human beings but on the earth, i. e. the whole of creation, the preservation of the functioning of the biosphere would have ethical priority" (Enxing 2021, 168).

In order to preserve a planet that is habitable for the whole creation by "doing climate justice" (Collet et al. 2022), theology must no longer be epistemologically based on humans alone, but on the dynamic interconnectedness of all different beings. With Claire Colebrook the climate crisis provokes a kind of "epistemological climate change" (Colebrook in: Braidotti 2014, 86), moving from pure rupture and anthropocentric heroism to fragility and interconnectedness. That's why Donna Haraway's "staying with the trouble" hits the crucial point even in theology (Haraway 2016). Even Pope Francis reminds in his latest letter on climate crisis *Laudate Deum* the "interaction between human beings and the environment, as occurs in the indigenous cultures" (*Laudate Deum* 27) and quotes Haraway to call for a "situated anthropocentrism" (*Laudate Deum* 67). In a recent Catholic-based volume, the editors emphasize the political-ethical contribution of such a theological perspective for climate justice: "Doing justice theologically, then, implies taking the risk to move beyond a framework or attitude of calculation, planning and—thus—domination. Instead, the risk is to enter a space of vulnerable openness. However, wouldn't this risky movement allow us, on a very fundamental level, to cultivate relationships towards other human and non-human lives, relationships that pay attention to the dignity and worth of all beings?" (Collet et al. 2022, XII).

For Practical Theology in a European context the wisdom of "In-Between" leads to solidarity with the apocalyptic urgency of climate activism as well as to the self-critical transformation of religious thinking

and worldmaking from sovereignty to the wisdom of interconnectedness.

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