

# 1. "Our House is on Fire." Introduction

## 1.1 *The impetus of Fridays for Future*

"Our house is on fire. I am here to say, our house is on fire." (Greta Thunberg 2019). With these words, Greta Thunberg began her speech to the World Economic Forum in Davos on 25.1.2019. At that point, she had already experienced a spectacular six months since she had sat down in front of the Swedish Parliament in Stockholm on 20.8.2018, the first school day after the Swedish summer holidays, with a sign "Skolstrejk för klimatet" ("School strike for climate"). It took about two and a half months for other students in Sweden and other countries to join her. As late as November 2018, they gave themselves the name "Fridays for Future" based on their Friday school strikes. A worldwide movement was born that had probably never been seen before in a comparable way.

Despite the full brakes of the coronavirus pandemic, with Fridays for Future the global environmental movement reached an unimagined peak. For over a year, countless young people around the globe engaged in the movement with dedication and competence, creativity and humour, passion and unwaveringness for a rapid reversal of policy towards global and effective climate justice. In doing so, they joined a movement that goes back to the beginnings of the 20th century. The philosopher Ludwig Klages (1872 Hannover–1956 Kilchberg, CH), for example, criticised the destruction of nature that accompanied industrialisation as early as a year before the First World War: "Railroad tracks, telegraph wires, power lines cut through forests and mountain profiles with raw straightness.... the same grey multi-storey tenements line up uniformly wherever the educated man unfolds his 'beneficial' activity; the river courses, which once glided in labyrinthine curves between lush slopes, are made into dead-straight canals; the rapids and waterfalls, even the Niagara, have electric collecting points to feed; forests of chimneys rise up on their banks, and the poisonous effluents of the factories burn away the louder waters of the earth; in short, the face of the mainland is generally transformed into a Chicago interspersed with agriculture." (Ludwig Klages 1913). In the same year, under the patronage of Crown Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria (1869–1955), the Bund Naturschutz was founded in Klages' then home

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town of Munich, which is still the backbone of the German environmental and nature conservation movement.

Interrupted by the two world wars and the subsequent reconstruction, the problem of global environmental destruction has only become more perceptible and important since about 1970. Due to the scarcity of resources, especially oil, but also due to the awareness of social differences in the world, a first quantum leap in social consciousness took place. The nature, species and heritage protection movement of the early 20th century broadened its horizons, became an environmental movement in a more comprehensive sense and thus reached new milieus: in political debate, in the sciences—including theology and ethics—, in religions—including Christianity—and in many other social groups, ecology became an issue. Ultimately, this first quantum leap led to the founding of green parties and the introduction of environmental ministries in many democratic countries.

But even after the UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio in 1992 and the subsequent political and social processes, ecology remained a minority topic until a few years ago. This was true for science, even where one deals most directly with ecological issues, namely in biology and physics. In theology, too, some disciplines have remained largely ecologically indifferent to this day. Parallel to the sciences, the role of environmental policy in the overall political arena is developing. Rio had called for the ecological question to become a cross-cutting issue in all politics. But until the mid-2010s, it remained more of a "nice to have" issue, ranking far behind the "must haves" such as foreign, financial, economic and social policy and having to live on what fell as crumbs from the table of the powerful.

It is only since the second half of the last decade that there have been signs of a new quantum leap. The climate conference in Paris in 2015, supported among others by Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato si'* published shortly before, triggered a new jolt. Greta Thunberg therefore came at exactly the right moment. She was the spark for which there was already plenty of explosive material. In one fell swoop, the issue of climate justice became a top priority—but one that has yet to prove durable after the coronavirus pandemic.

### 1.2 *The environmental crisis as a sign of the times*

This book is titled "Christian Creation Ethics". This designation includes both a formal and a material specification. *Formally*, the term "creation" is a direct correlative to the belief in a single Creator God "who made heaven and earth" (Ps 121:2). A creation ethic is conceptually immanently monotheistic—Jewish, Christian or Islamic. As a Christian creation ethic, it is deeply connected to the creation ethics of the other two monotheistic religions, without negating their independence. In all modesty, but also in all transparency, one's own standpoint on faith is displayed and offered for discussion. This display of one's own standpoint on faith as an offer for discussion is not only addressed to the monotheistic sister religions, but also enables a connection to secular, especially philosophical environmental ethics: Like these, the ethics of creation also claims to be capable of dialogue and comprehensible for all religions and world views.

*Materially*, creation ethics combines the often separately discussed areas of environmental and animal ethics. "Environment" (German Umwelt, literally surrounding world) is usually defined in contrast to "co-world" (German Mitwelt). While co-world means the other human and non-human living beings, environment refers to the house of life, the "oikos", which is in the term ecology. Environmental ethics or ecological ethics is therefore ethics that primarily asks how to deal responsibly with the house and only secondarily with the inhabitants of the house. By contrast, co-world ethics or animal and plant ethics is ethics that primarily asks about the responsible treatment of the inhabitants of the house and only secondarily about the treatment of the house. Creation ethics encompasses both and considers human behaviour towards both the living house and living beings. This also signals that environmental and co-world ethics can be distinguished between, but not separated—as often as this happens in scientific reflection.

For long stretches, this book deals with questions of justification that are equally relevant for environmental and co-world ethics. The last chapters, which search for sustainable motivations and attitudes, also have the same weighting in terms of environmental and co-world ethics. However, I spell out the concreteness of responsibility for creation only for the two greatest environmental problems, namely global warming and biodiversity loss. I do this in the conviction that they exemplify what is at stake overall: a fundamentally new relationship between humankind and creation.

Theologically speaking, the environmental crisis is a "sign of the times": a phenomenon that characterises an era and leaves a particular mark on

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it. It touches on essential questions of human existence. Because such a phenomenon has a crisis character, it demands decisions (κρίνειν, to divorce, to separate). It changes people's consciousness (Markus Vogt 2018, 248–249). "Signs of the times" are thus something like "identity markers"—characteristics by which the late 20th and early 21st centuries will be recognised for generations to come. The environmental crisis will inevitably be one of these identity markers. The present time will one day be remembered as the "time of the great environmental crisis"—perhaps negatively, in that it was here that the catastrophe began, but hopefully positively, in that it was here that the endeavours to overcome it were begun.

Even the first European Ecumenical Assembly in Basel in 1989 understood the global threats to justice, peace and the integrity of creation as signs of the times to which it sought a response (EEA 5). According to the Pastoral Constitution of the Second Vatican Council, it is one of the central tasks of the Church "to search for the signs of the times and to interpret them in the light of the Gospel. In this way, she can then answer, in a manner appropriate to each generation, the lasting questions of people about the meaning of present and future life and about the relationship of the two to one another. It is therefore necessary to grasp and understand the world in which we live, its expectations, aspirations and its often dramatic character." (GS 4)

Consequently, the church and theology must not play down this "dramatic character" of our epoch but must take it seriously and deal with it appropriately. In view of its eternity orientation, religion is tempted to diminish the dramatic nature of earthly life and to point to the "real challenges" that are located with reference to the hereafter. All the more clearly, the Council admonishes that the mission of the Church and theology is in this world and must take seriously the earthly needs of human beings and creation. This is precisely what this book aims to do.

### 1.3 Bound in the bag of life

"Our house is on fire. I am here to say, our house is on fire." (Greta Thunberg 2019). A *creation ethic* that trivialises or relativises this sentence is not worth writing. But, as we will see in chapter 7, that would not be in keeping with Jesus of Nazareth either, whose apocalyptic legacy informs his central message, "Repent!" to the pores. The first thing *Christian* creation ethics can contribute, compared to its secular cousins, is to clearly grasp

and reflect on the narrative of this drama, which the secular environmental movement largely owes to the monotheistic religions of the West anyway. This book, then, aims to illuminate, analyse and raise awareness of the ecological narrative—and thus to raise its potential, which often still lies dormant.

A second contribution can be made by decidedly theological creation ethics: serenity and trust that do not make us inert, but empower and liberate us to act ecologically, which relieve the pressure and the constraint without diminishing the drama. They do not pretend to be cheap comforts but speak plainly and yet allow hope (chapter 10). For they know that this earth is mysteriously sustained precisely as a threatened and battered one.

This inscription is often found on Jewish gravestones:

אָרוּרָה בָּאָרוּרָה הַחַיִּים  
*šərûrâ bîṣrôr haḥayyîm*

In English, this means "bound in the bag of life". This phrase is found in 1 Sam 25:29<sup>1</sup>. There Abigail apologises for her husband Nabal, who refused hospitality to the later King David, and reinforces her apology with a blessing: "But if any man arise to persecute thee, and to seek thy life, let the life of my lord [i.e. David's, note MR] be bound up with the LORD thy God in the bag of life: but the life of thine enemies may the LORD fling away with a sling."

Instead of David, one could also refer this blessing to the earth or to every single creature. For a blessing can hardly be formulated more beautifully—and at the same time it makes the constant threat abundantly clear, which does not simply disappear. Blessing means the wish not to be lost as fragile, endangered and, ultimately in any case, mortal living beings, but to be carried—"bound in the bag of life".

But what does the "bag of life" mean? Even in the ancient Orient, cattle breeders and shepherds kept careful records of their livestock. Kings and princes who had scribes at their side did this in writing. But the people who did not know how to read and write used a simple symbol. When the owner of the flock sent the shepherds commissioned by him on a journey with his flock, as many small stones as there were animals in the flock were put into a bag. Then the bag was closed twice, by the owner

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<sup>1</sup> I first became aware of this sentence through my Old Testament colleague Maria Häusl, with whom I offered an interdisciplinary seminar under this heading at the University of Würzburg in the winter semester 1997/98. It is still one of my most beautiful teaching experiences.

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of the herd and by the shepherds, so that no one could open the bag without it being recognisable. When the shepherds returned, the animals were counted, and their number, subtracting the new-born lambs, was compared with the number of stones in the bag. In this way, both sides could be sure that the shepherds had fulfilled their task faithfully. The bag was called the "bag of life". Every single sheep was bound into it. None was to be lost.

Man as the "image of God" (Gen. 1:26) is just such a shepherd to whom God's flock is entrusted in faithful hands. He is not the owner of the animals, but "only" their keeper. And he is to remember that when he returns, he must account for each of the animals. For each, even the smallest, supposedly most useless creature of this earth is "bound up in the bag of life".

### 1.4 *The structure of the book*

This positioning of human responsibility (ethical formal object) for the house of life on earth and its inhabitants (material object) between the unprecedented threat and the unshakeable belief in being supported in this threat (theological formal object) results in the structure of this treatise. Put simply, it follows the classic three-step process of seeing (chapter 2)–judging (chapters 3–7)–acting (chapters 8–10).

Chapter 2 identifies, analyses and surveys the greatest ecological challenges currently facing us, questions their causes and illuminates their drama and urgency. The concept of limits plays a key role in this, both scientifically and ethically.

Chapters 3 and 4 search in two of the most important sources of theological knowledge (so-called "loci theologici") for standards for an appropriate perception of the environmental crisis and ecological perspectives for action from the perspective of Christian theology. First, chapter 3 examines the Bible as the original knowledge of the Christian faith and then chapter 4 the liturgy with its symbols and rituals as its visible realisation. A remarkable difference will be revealed between the two sources, many aspects of whose theological treatment are still outstanding.

Chapter 5 then locates the previously raised Christian creation ethics in the discourses and approaches of philosophical environmental ethics and elaborates the specific contribution of theology and religion. It is precisely the greater emotionality of faith that gains significance here and has consequences for the rational justification of creation ethics.

Chapter 6 deals with the central bridging discourse that connects politics, society and the economy, the natural sciences and humanities, and religious and secular convictions in the struggle for ecological stability: the concept of sustainability or sustainable development. Against the background of its historical origins and its systematic ethical classification, its opportunities, but also its limits, become clear.

In the German-speaking world, the sustainability discourse has given rise to the secular concept of a "great transformation", a sociological and political concept that will be linked to the classical Christian message of conversion in chapter 7. It will have to be asked whether and what added value the theological concept of ecological conversion contributes to the sociological concept of transformation.

Ecological conversion requires structural changes, especially in the dominant social subsystem of the market economy. These are dealt with in chapter 8. Ecological conversion, however, also requires personal reorientation towards the good life and corresponding attitudes. These are examined in chapter 9. Structural and individual reforms must complement and strengthen each other if humanity is to live up to its responsibility.

Finally, it must be asked how environmental activists can escape burnout in their tireless commitment and how society as a whole can escape paralysing environmental anxiety. Here, the question of hope, which has always been considered the domain of religions, will have to be asked anew. Chapter 10 will show, however, that especially in the monotheistic religions, a number of corrections are necessary in order to arrive at a sustainable concept of hope that does not trivialise the drama.