

7. More than greenwashing. Ecological conversion

“According to the IPCC, we are less than 12 years away from not being able to undo our mistakes. ... Yes, we are failing, but there is still time to turn everything around. We can still fix this. We still have everything in our own hands. But unless we recognise the overall failures of our current systems, we most probably don’t stand a chance. ... Adults keep saying: ‘We owe it to the young people to give them hope’. But I don’t want your hope. I don’t want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic. I want you to feel the fear I feel every day. And then I want you to act. I want you to act as you would in a crisis. I want you to act as if our house is on fire. Because it is.” (Greta Thunberg 2019)

The house of the earth is on fire—and time is running out. Humanity is running astray—and should actually be panicking. This is what Greta Thunberg said before the World Economic Forum in Davos in 2019. With this, she uses classic Judeo-Christian diction, the diction of apocalypticism. And without mentioning the word, she calls for radical conversion—like Jesus of Nazareth once did.

As unifying and integrative as the sustainability discourse is, it runs the risk of degenerating into “greenwashing”. Left to its own devices, it can hardly defend itself against this. That is the fate of links and couplings: What is coupled to them is out of their hands. This is another reason why it is important to take the steps towards concrete action in a profiled way and to adequately respond to the dramatic situation described in the first chapters in the following chapters. To this end, in this chapter, I will analyse the concept of “ecological conversion”, which is used as a key concept in the encyclical *Laudato si’*. I read it as a theological equivalent of what is secularly called “great transformation” and ask where the specific value of the Christian message of conversion lies in the ecological context. In order to appreciate this in its full depth, the message of conversion of Jesus of Nazareth must be opened up as an apocalyptic concept.

7.1 *The concept of the “great transformation”*

In recent years, one concept in particular has caused a furore in the sustainability debate: the concept of the “great transformation”, which the

German Advisory Council on Global Change (WBGU) chose as the headline and main content of its 2011 annual report (shortly before, Helmut Haberl et al. 2011). This concept addresses both the depth of the crisis and the urgency of its solution (Ulrich Brand/ Markus Wissen 2018, 287). Admittedly, despite an English open-access version of the WBGU’s 2011 Annual Report and some scientific articles on it published in English, the debate has hardly transcended the German-speaking world. Nevertheless, the concept and basic idea seem to me to be valuable in adequately describing the magnitude of the challenge ahead.

The term comes from the Hungarian-Austrian sociologist Karl Polanyi (1886 Vienna–1964 Pickering/Ontario), who published his groundbreaking work “The Great Transformation. The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time” in 1944. It is still considered one of the great works of sociology and describes the industrial revolution as a holistic transformation of society. If the WBGU follows Polanyi’s lead, it is based on the thesis that the ecological transformation that is now necessary is the third comprehensive “revolution” in human culture after the Neolithic and Industrial Revolutions. In terms of time, i.e. quantity, it goes far beyond changes of medium scope (WBGU 2011, 87) and in terms of complexity, i.e. quality, it goes far beyond purely technical (WBGU 2011, 88) or economic (WBGU 2011, 89) changes. Moreover, there are no role models for them in history or in other countries.

Carl Christian von Weizsäcker thinks this is “too much pathos... It is easier to discuss the proposals objectively if one leaves out the outrageous comparison with the industrial revolution” (Carl Christian von Weizsäcker 2011, 246). In contrast to Polanyi and the WBGU, von Weizsäcker believes that the current social structure is ideally suited to solving environmental problems: “When one sees what human medicine is capable of, the solution to the climate problem is one among many problems that the future will solve, even within the given institutional framework” (Carl Christian von Weizsäcker 2011, 247). Von Weizsäcker is by no means alone in this assessment. The term “great transformation” thus marks a dividing line between those who see the environmental problem as a manageable, sectoral problem and favour a kind of “sustainability light”, and those for whom, as for Greta Thunberg, it is a symptom of a fundamentally misguided system in need of complete structural reform. According to Helmut Haberl et al. (2011), fundamental reorientation of the economy and society is needed, not just a few technical repairs.

The WBGU recognises in industrial modernity a serious narrowing of the aspects of a good life to that which is material. Thus, the economy has

gained dominance over all other areas of society: “Since the beginning of the modern era, attitudes and calculations based on individual utility maximisation have prevailed. With the advent of industrial mass production, the ‘good life’ became increasingly equated with material prosperity. In the course of the ‘transformation’ (Polanyi, 1944), an extensive dislodging of the economy from its social and life-world references took place. This functional differentiation of the economic system has given it an autonomy that has enabled hitherto undreamed-of increases in productivity; but it has also led to the social order as a whole being subject to economisation.” (WBGU 2011, 71)

7.1.1 A “transformation of value attitudes”

For the WBGU, it is therefore clearly also about a “transformation of values” (WBGU 2011, 71). This cannot be imposed by force in a democracy. “It must be in harmony with ideas of a good and successful life, which in turn are widespread and attractive.” (WBGU 2011, 71) But the WBGU sees the beginnings of this new value system already emerging. Post-material thinking is no longer the preserve of a small group, as a 2010 survey by the Bertelsmann Foundation proves (WBGU 2011, 72). “The advance of value attitudes oriented to environmental and sustainability aspects, among other things, can be explained by a theory of value change.” (WBGU 2011, 73) This can be empirically proven by the research by Ronald Inglehart and with the help of the data from the World Values Survey (WVS) in most world regions and cultural areas (WBGU 2011, 73). In the fifth wave of the WVS from 2005 to 2008, around 90 per cent of respondents in 49 countries would have rated global warming and the loss of animal and plant diversity as serious or very serious problems in each case (WBGU 2011, 75). Slightly more than half of all respondents would have said that “more attention should be paid to environmental protection, even if economic growth is reduced and jobs are lost as a result” (WBGU 2011, 76). “In other words, those who support sustainability goals are not swimming against the tide (anymore).” (WBGU 2011, 81)

Nevertheless, the WBGU goes on to say that major resistance must be overcome in the case of concrete ecological reforms (WBGU 2011, 82). Often, collision with previous cultural practices is the decisive obstacle (WBGU 2011, 82). Therefore, the consent of the people must be sought. “Thus, transformation cannot be justified by the ‘planetary boundaries’ alone, but also by the ‘open frontiers’ of human existence... As a rule, a

‘good life’ depends on the fulfilment of certain basic needs, including the existence of individual leeway and options that must be secured by material standards. In addition—transculturally—immaterial factors play a role in the ‘pursuit of happiness’, such as recognition by others, embedding in communities and networks of various kinds, especially family ones, but also the fulfilment of aesthetic and hedonistic pleasures. Any transformation strategy that can make it plausible that proposed or prescribed changes are compatible with these immaterial goals, i.e. that they not only do not have to dampen subjective life satisfaction, but can even increase it, is more promising than a strategy that prescribes reductions solely out of external constraints and thus triggers problem repression and loss aversion.” (WBGU 2011, 84–85)

In a nutshell: “Self-restraint to avoid dangerous climate change and other damage to the Earth system is not a revolution in the history of ideas” (WBGU 2011, 85), because people are sufficiently familiar with victim strategies. Therefore, a new narrative is needed so “that prosperity, democracy and security are shaped in relation to the natural limits of the Earth system” (WBGU 2011, 281). This narrative is repeated and invoked several times, but nowhere unfolded. It is about “stability, security, prosperity and fairness in a closely interconnected global society within the limits of the Earth system” (WBGU 2011, 346). “The state... takes into account the limits within which the economy and society can develop on a finite planet.” The regulatory framework set by the state serves the options for freedom of present and future generations (WBGU 2011, 295) and the “survivability of humanity within the natural limits of planet Earth” (WBGU 2011, 337).

In view of the ambitious goals aroused by the title “Great Transformation”, the proposed solutions thus remain rather narrow. The report also concentrates very strongly on global warming and almost completely ignores the even more pressing problem of biodiversity loss. And for global warming, differentiated technical proposals are made over long stretches, but hardly any lifestyle issues are touched upon. This comment hits the nail on the head: “Overall, however, there is hardly any mention of people in the WBGU report.” (Adelheid Biesecker/ Uta von Winterfeld 2013, 162)

7.1.2 Existing power relations as the biggest obstacle

It is evident that transformation processes cannot be carried out overnight, but are made up of many small transformations: “In history, therefore,

there are no temporally clearly determinable tipping points of development that herald a change of epoch. Rather, historical and comprehensive transformations result from ‘frequency condensations of changes.’” (WBGU 2011, 91) Nevertheless, the crucial question remains as to why, despite the shift in values towards post-material thinking in everyday actions, there is no trend towards sustainable development, but on the contrary, even in industrialised societies, there is still a rising or at most stagnating level of environmental consumption.

The WBGU describes the transformation pathways strongly in line with John Grin et al. (2010). They interpret transformation as the co-evolution of different societal subsystems that influence each other. The multitude of actors makes the process difficult to control. However, it can be promoted through the moral and structural support of pioneers. Overall, the WBGU is concerned with “embedding the economy in the limits of the Earth system” (WBGU 2011, 24). Yet one gets the impression that both the WBGU and Grin and colleagues do not really look the force of economic development in the face. This is diametrically opposed to the title of the study because: “Karl Polanyi, to whom the WBGU refers with its concept of transformation, pointed not only to the necessity of social and political embedding of the economy, but also and especially to the aggressive expansionism of the self-regulated market with destructive consequences for people and nature, for societies and their values. His vision is an industrial society not based on the market, in which labour, land and money or capital are withdrawn from the market.” (Adelheid Biesecker/ Uta von Winterfeld 2013, 163)

The accusation that Polanyi is received too superficially by the WBGU appears not only once: “According to Polanyi, the ‘Great Transformation’ has thus transformed social, political and economic relations in such a way that markets are less and less embedded in traditional conventions. On the contrary, social space is increasingly subordinating itself to market logic... The market system makes excessive demands on people and nature and thus leads to counter-movements for political regulatory protection. The development dynamics of capitalist industrial states will therefore be crisis-like... Proposals for solutions ... should therefore start at the structural roots of economic utilisation, which affects patterns of use and distribution across sectors.” (Maja Göpel/ Moritz Remig 2014, 72) Ultimately, the 2011 WBGU report is structurally blind and neglects to turn the crucial levers: “Recourse to Polanyi allows for an integrated, systemic as well as structural view of multiple crises” (Maja Göpel/ moritz Remig 2014, 72).

In chapter 8, we will address these structural dimensions of the eco-social crisis.

Structural changes in the market economy do occur in the WBGU Annual Report 2011: in Chapter 4.5.2 under the heading “Financing the Transformation” (172–182); in Box 5.2.1 by presenting the debate on the role of economic growth (188–189); and in Chapter 5.2 “Policy Instruments for Managing the Transformation” (190–193). But from the division into two chapters and from the headings one already can see that the central, structure-changing role of carbon credits, carbon taxes and other instruments is not really recognised. Thus, no comprehensive and coherent structural change of the economic system can be envisaged.

Significant shifts in power are associated with economic structural reforms. In its historical analysis, the WBGU describes very aptly that the industrial revolution was accompanied by the disempowerment of the aristocracy and had a tendency towards equality for all, but that it also established or at least massively expanded the superiority of Western states over other world regions (WBGU 2011, 95). On this basis, the WBGU predicts a shift in power in the upcoming transformation: At the national level, power is shifting from the losers to the winners of the transformation. At the international level, power relations will change through the shift from competition to mutual dependence. However, the fact that both shifts are associated with considerable upheavals is not reflected further.

For this reason, Ulrich Brand and Markus Wissen consider the social science analysis weak because it does not identify the potential drivers of change. What is needed, they argue, is to understand the social relations of power and domination that cause and mask the crisis and that are inherently contradictory. As a key concept, they propose the “imperial mode of living” (IML) of the global North (Ulrich Brand/ Markus Wissen 2018, 287), which they define as follows: “In times of globalizing capitalism the IML means a ‘good living’ for parts of humanity at the cost of others... the IML depends on an external sphere from which it gets its resources and to which it can shift its social-environmental costs. Therefore, it is based on”diverse processes of 'externalization' (Less“nich 2018) a”d 'separation'—between ‘valuable’ (market) processes, commodities and wage-labour and ‘worthless’ other forms of labour or nature (Biesecker and Hofmeister 2010)... It became a mass phenomenon to the extent that the 'ener'y available per dollar earned' increased (Huber 2013, '179). Soc'etal relations were stabilized due to their environmentally and socially unsustainable character.” (Ulrich Brand/ Markus Wissen 2018, 288)

The imperial way of life is thus defined, on the one hand, by the externalisation of ecological and social costs and, on the other hand, by the strict separation of two economic “worlds”, so that in one energy is becoming cheaper and cheaper. And since IML has extended to the upper and middle classes of many countries in the Global South since the 1980s, the “great acceleration” already mentioned in chapter 2.6 occurred in global terms (Ulrich Brand/ Markus Wissen 2018, 288). Even these few considerations give a good indication of the explanatory value of the IML model (Ulrich Brand/ Markus Wissen 2018, 289): it explains the central blockages in overcoming unsustainability, for this is deeply inscribed in political, social and economic structures. Consequently, it is a social crisis, not of “humanity” in the abstract, but of a very specific group and its form of domination. The productivity gains of the Global North are not even conceivable without the Global South—they come about through cost externalisation. Consequently, the emerging countries are now also trying to externalise their costs—just think of China.

Eva Lövbrand and colleagues (2015, 213) have criticised the “post-social ontology” of the Anthropocene discourse in this sense. If the human dimension of ecological change is emphasised, this tells us little about social dynamics. Similarly, the model of planetary boundaries per se obscures global inequalities. However, according to Brand and Wissen (2018, 290), it is precisely the struggle against these inequalities that leads to the best concepts of sustainability. For the alternative to IML is a “solidary mode of living” (Ulrich Brand/ Markus Wissen 2018, 291). In this respect, there is every reason to complement the natural science discourses of the Anthropocene and planetary boundaries with the social science discourse of the Great Transformation. However, the latter must then also be understood and developed as a social science complement, as in the contributions of the authors mentioned above.

As a theologian, the question that arises for me is whether and, if so, what the theological counterpart, namely the talk of “ecological conversion”, can bring to the sociological and political analysis of the imperial way of life. This will be examined in the next section.

7.2 *The Concept of “Ecological Conversion”*

The call to repentance is at the core of the messages of John the Baptist and Jesus—so we are at the very foundation of the Gospel. And for both of them the message of repentance stands in an apocalyptic horizon of

thought—the theology of their time was simply apocalyptic, and so this figure of thought belongs to the theological heritage of both personalities. Unlike John, however, Jesus’ call to repentance is not preceded by the threat of judgement, but by the approaching reign of God: “The time is fulfilled, the reign of God (βασιλεία τοῦ Θεοῦ) is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel!” (Mark 1:15)

The call to repentance, at least according to Mark, is thus directed first and foremost towards the model of comprehensive peace in Creation. Jesus, as the new Adam, lives in peace with wild animals (Mk. 1:13). The reign of God has thus come close precisely because in Jesus’ coming peace has dawned with the whole of Creation. The *offer of* divine love made in Jesus’ turning to Creation enables and encourages human beings to open themselves to this turning and to do their part out of it. Jesus’ call to repentance therefore transcends every sinister threat from the outset as well as every performance-oriented work’s righteousness. The willingness to repent may be triggered by warning signs alone—but it can only be nourished in the long term by gratitude and the feeling of being secure, supported and accepted.

Nevertheless, the Greek verb μετανοεῖν and the noun μετάνοια, literally “to rethink”, as well as the underlying Hebrew *šwb*, translated as “to return, to turn around, to convert”, contain the idea of existentially *comprehensive reorientation*. Conversion demands the whole person; Jesus’ claim is total. In baptism, which was already connected with the call to conversion in John the Baptist, this totality of the claim becomes clear: it is about a *change of dominion*. The Christian baptismal confession verbally includes turning away from evil and turning towards God. In the symbolism of immersion and re-emergence, this process of faith is sacramentally condensed: “So you also should understand yourselves as people who are dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 6:11). This change of dominion indicates that the question of power is at stake: Who has the power? Who is king? To whom and to what logic do we submit?

In the call to repentance, the absolute *urgency* of Jesus’ claim becomes clear in view of the *dramatic nature* of the present situation. Presumably, not all the words of judgement and threat that the Gospels put into Jesus’ mouth will have come from him. But it can hardly be denied that Jesus threatened in order to inculcate his message. In his cries of woe, threats and apocalyptic scenarios, the urgency and unpostponable nature of conversion is unmistakably addressed. The reign of God does not tolerate any delay: Now is the time!

Finally, the idea of conversion implies a social *concatenation of the fate of all* among themselves: “You will all perish together if you do not convert!” In the pericope Lk. 13:1–9 this sentence appears twice, as if it were its quintessence. The analogy to the Noah narrative is obvious: human action has an impact on the entire community of creatures. Repentance is not a private matter, but an expression of responsibility for the whole: all creatures are in one boat—none can survive without the others.

In this sense, the Ecumenical Assemblies in Dresden in 1989 and Basel in 1989 already spoke of conversion to peace with Creation and made this idea the guiding matrix of their reflections. For in the horizon of the message of conversion, the depth of the present crisis can be seen very clearly. It is not just an external “environmental crisis” that can be remedied technically, but a crisis of orientation and identity rooted in people’s inner attitude towards Creation. It is rooted in misguided basic attitudes: “There is the delusion that man is capable of shaping the world; the presumption that leads to an overestimation of man’s role in relation to the whole of life; an ideology of constant growth without reference to ethical values...; the conviction that the created world has been handed over to us for exploitation and not for care and nurturing; the blind trust that new discoveries will solve the problems that arise in each case...” (EEA 19). Technology is seen only in terms of its power over nature; this is reduced to its aspect of use and thus perceived in an anthropocentric narrowing; ideas of happiness are guided by the question of having and possessing (Commission VI of the German Bishops’ Conference 1998, (28)–(35)).

So, a little environmental technology and a few ecological actions are not enough. The reversal process that is necessary must start much more fundamentally. It demands the whole human being. It is about a 180-degree turnaround.

At the same time, the quotation from the European Ecumenical Assembly in Basel in 1989 makes it clear that not only are individual misconceptions at the root of the crisis but so are structural misdevelopments. The process of conversion therefore also requires a *reversal of structures*. This realisation was not yet accessible to the people of Jesus’ time. Admittedly, they sensed that the rule of “evil” is supra-individual and corrupts entire networks of relationships. But social structures and their laws have only become scientifically accessible and analysable in the past centuries.

The term “*structures of sin*” first appeared in Latin American liberation theology, officially in the documents of the II and III General Assemblies of the Latin American Bishops’ Council CELAM in Medellín in 1968

and Puebla in 1979. Medellín speaks of “structures of oppression” and “unjust structures” (no. 2; 6; 19), Puebla of “unjust structures” (no. 16; 43; 573; 1155; 1257) and “structures of sin” (no. 281; 452). The two Bishops’ Assemblies thus refer to a sinful condition which is not the result of individual behaviour but the effect of wrong or lacking organisation of rules in social subsystems. In the background is the recognition of the inherent dynamics of systems vis-à-vis the individuals who are integrated into them. In the case of culpable conditions in such self-dynamic systems, it is of no use to demand a change in individual behaviour alone. Rather, the systems themselves must also be changed. Responsibility for this lies with those institutions that are entrusted with the rules and structures of a system. In order to be able to change the system in the desired sense, those responsible need a high degree of knowledge about the regulatory mechanisms. The social science disciplines are primarily responsible for this.

For liberation theology in the 1960s and 1970s, the focus is naturally on the largely unregulated, almost anarchic world economic system. As long as there are no fair rules for the global market, the thesis goes, the countries of the South have no chance of securing a fair income for themselves in the long term. Now, in the meantime, there are different regulations for the global flow of goods, but the “imperial way of life” that Ulrich Brand and Markus Wissen diagnose still exists. If we take the idea of conversion of structures further here, then those economic structures that shape and nourish this imperial way of life must be transformed into their opposite. Individual and structural conversion belong together and can only have a sustainable effect together.

7.3 Conversion as an apocalyptic programme

“Antarctic ice could melt completely!” was the headline of the German BILD newspaper on the symbolic 11th September in 2015 and added: “German researchers sound the alarm”. It was referring to a study published the same day by the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research, which calculated the worst-case scenario in the event that humanity burns up all available fossil resources for energy production in the medium term. The Antarctic ice would melt completely, and the sea level would rise by three metres per century or by 58 metres in total (Ricarda Winkelmann et al. 2015).

Even if one takes into account that the BILD newspaper, by omitting the time horizons, audium es the scientific forecasts even more, the example of the study itself reveals a methodology that has characterised much of the climate research of recent decades: It works “apocalyptically”. In terms of methodology, it is mainly oriented towards worst-case scenarios; in terms of content, it focuses on objects that can be sure of public attention because they are visually very memorable. Thus, of the three environmental media soil, air and water, the latter can be depicted most visually (melting of the poles and mountain glaciers, flood disasters, etc.). And among the many animal species affected by global warming, the large mammals enjoy the highest attention. In this way, the polar bear (large mammal) on an ice floe drifting in the sea (environmental medium water) has become one of the most important images of global warming.

The characterisation of scientific publications on climate research as apocalyptic is by no means meant to be pejorative or even disqualifying. On the contrary: the apocalyptic tradition of the Christian message going back to Jesus of Nazareth makes it clear that this is a tried and tested, perhaps even indispensable means when the underprivileged demand their rights vis-à-vis the powerful of the world. Only these powerful people use the term “apocalyptic” to discredit an idea and preserve the status quo (Michael Rosenberger 2013; for the following, see also Michael Rosenberger 2016).

Now, apocalyptic thinking is a decidedly religious programme. It is about power and powerlessness, about conversion and new beginnings, about global destruction and hope for a new earth. It is precisely from this perspective that I would like to read the encyclical *Laudato si'*: To what extent can apocalyptic figures of thought be found in it? And how are these theologically interpreted and deepened?

7.3.1 Apocalyptic figures of thought in the perception of the world

“A very solid scientific consensus indicates that we are presently witnessing a disturbing warming of the climatic system” (LS 23). “If present trends continue, this century may well witness extraordinary climate change and an unprecedented destruction of ecosystems, with serious consequences for all of us” (LS 24). With these two statements at the beginning of the encyclical, the Pope unmistakably brushes aside all claims by the so-called climate sceptics that there is no global warming or that it is not anthropogenic. As is well known, lobby groups have tried to convince the Pope

of the opposite, and with Cardinal George Pell, the prefect of the Secretariat for the Economy, a proven climate sceptic sat in the Vatican (on his theses: see Michael Rosenberger 2013a). Francis, on the other hand, rightly endorses the scientific opinion that has been held by an overwhelming majority of experts since the 1980s and rejects “denial of the problem” (LS 14).

For the Pope, the dramatic nature of the challenges becomes particularly clear when the imbalances between rich and poor are taken into account: “We all know that it is not possible to sustain the present level of consumption in developed countries and wealthier sectors of society, where the habit of wasting and discarding has reached unprecedented levels. The exploitation of the planet has already exceeded acceptable limits and we still have not solved the problem of poverty” (LS 27). “We know how unsustainable the behaviour of those who constantly consume and destroy is, while others are not yet able to live in a way worthy of their human dignity” (LS 193). These considerations converge strongly with the thesis of the “imperial lifestyle”. To bring the resulting drama to the point, the Pope states that with the challenge of leaving “a habitable planet for future generations”, “our own dignity is at stake” (LS 160). It is a question of all or nothing.

So, there is no question that Francis sees the current environmental destruction as dramatic. But how has humanity reacted to the dramatic nature of the challenge? Francis criticises the current generation with harsh words (and does not differentiate between individual groups here, but this does not mean that he does not see the differences). For him, “the post-industrial period may well be remembered as one of the most irresponsible in history” (LS 165). For it only cloaks itself in a bit of ecology in order to postpone the steps that are actually necessary: “As often occurs in periods of deep crisis which require bold decisions, we are tempted to think that what is happening is not entirely clear. Superficially, apart from a few obvious signs of pollution and deterioration, things do not look that serious, and the planet could continue as it is for some time. Such evasiveness serves as a licence to carry on with our present lifestyles and models of production and consumption. This is the way human beings contrive to feed their self-destructive vices: trying not to see them, trying not to acknowledge them, delaying the important decisions and pretending that nothing will happen.” (LS 59)

In this context, as in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii audium*, the concept of indifference appears—towards the environmental crisis (LS 14), the poor and environmental refugees (LS 25; 52) and non-human

creatures (LS 92). For Francis, this indifference is one of the greatest errors of contemporary society and one of the greatest obstacles on the path of conversion. At the same time, he is aware that the indifferent are also to be found in the Church and “some committed and prayerful Christians, with the excuse of realism and pragmatism, tend to ridicule expressions of concern for the environment. Others are passive; they choose not to change their habits and thus become inconsistent.” (LS 217)

The indifference of the people corresponds to the inactivity of politics. Francis notes “weak international political responses” (LS 54). “Politics and business have been slow to react in a way commensurate with the urgency of the challenges facing our world” (LS 165). And he warns, “If politics shows itself incapable of breaking such perverse logic, and remains caught up in inconsequential discussions, we will continue to avoid facing the major problems of humanity” (LS 197). He sees the core of the problem here in the subjugation of politics “to technology and finance” (LS 54; cf. also LS 109; 189).

Instead of indifference and inaction, “we should be enraged by the injustices that exist among us” (LS 90). A kind of “holy anger” would be necessary to achieve tangible progress, for time is pressing (cf. LS 13). Like Paul VI, Francis inculcates “the urgent need for a radical change in the conduct of humanity” (LS 4): “All of this shows the urgent need for us to move forward in a bold cultural revolution” (LS 114). Again and again, the Pope describes the necessary measures as “urgent” (LS 173; 175; 189; 201 et al.).

Like John Paul II. (General Audience on 17.1.2001, cited in LS 5), Francis uses the theological concept of (ecological) conversion for the “radical change” or the “cultural revolution”, to which a separate section of the encyclical is dedicated (6.III). For him, the current environmental crisis is a call “to profound interior conversion” (LS 217). Francis quotes the Australian bishops in this context: “We need to experience a conversion or change of heart” (LS 218, citing Australian Catholic Bishops Conference 2002, 4), and he stresses the communitarian character of this change: “The ecological conversion needed to bring about lasting change is also a community conversion.” (LS 219)

In the good tradition of liberation theology and following in the footsteps of his two immediate predecessors in the papacy, Francis emphasises that an individual ethical change of heart alone is not enough. In addition—according to one of the “red threads” that runs through the entire encyclical (LS 16)—there must be a fundamental change in economic and political structures: “Every effort to protect and improve our world entails

profound changes in 'lifestyles, models of production and consumption, and the established structures of power which today govern societies' (SRS 34)" (LS 5). "My predecessor Benedict XVI likewise proposed 'eliminating the structural causes of the dysfunctions of the world economy and correcting models of growth which have proved incapable of ensuring respect for the environment [...]' (LS 6, citing Benedict XVI, Address to the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See, 8.1.2007). Because the current economic system denies the poor in particular access to an adequate livelihood, Francis assesses it as "a system of commercial relations and ownership which is structurally perverse" (LS 52), and he concludes, "What is needed, in effect, is an agreement on systems of governance for the whole range of so-called 'global commons'" (LS 174).

One, if not the only major weakness in the content of the encyclical is the lack of understanding of the inherent logic of the economic system. It is true when Francis says: "The environment is one of those goods that cannot be adequately safeguarded or promoted by market forces." (LS 190, quoting Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 470). And he holds the key to solving this problem when he calls for everyone to bear the costs of the environmental damage they cause (LS 195) and for politics to translate this principle into rules in the market (LS 196). But he does not use the key to open the door to a transformation of the international economic order: He dismisses the only instrument he names that goes in this direction, emissions trading, as too quick and easy a sham (LS 171). Here, Francis is mistaken, and there have been bishops' conferences whose opinions would have advised him to make a different assessment.

7.3.2 Apocalyptic figures in theological interpretation

In the description of the defections of our present life and economy, apocalyptic paradigms thus take up a great deal of space. They occupy, as it were, the key positions of the papal analysis. But what about their theological interpretation?

First of all, the Pope refers back to the classical figure of thought since Aurelius Augustine of the counterposition of humility and arrogance. The deepest cause of the environmental crisis, according to Francis, is the arrogance of man, who puts himself in the place of God: "The harmony between the Creator, humanity and Creation as a whole was disrupted by our presuming to take the place of God and refusing to acknowledge

our creaturely limitations. This in turn distorted our mandate to 'have dominion' over the earth (cf. Gen. 1:28), to 'till it and keep it' (Gen. 2:15)." (LS 66) In this arrogance, the rich are "vainly showing off their supposed superiority" over the poor (LS 90). Conversion means conversion to humility (LS 224), to humilitas, the grateful affirmation of being created from humus, of nourishing oneself from the fruits of humus and of returning to humus at the end of life.

As a biblical foil to illustrate the dramatic nature of the current environmental crisis, but also the path and hope for its solution, the Pope, like a large part of the Christian and secular environmental movement, chooses the story of Noah and the great flood. With it, he interprets the problem that the wrongdoing of some is life-threatening for all: "when justice no longer dwells in the land, the Bible tells us that life itself is endangered. We see this in the story of Noah... These ancient stories, full of symbolism, bear witness to a conviction which we today share, that everything is interconnected, and that genuine care for our own lives and our relationships with nature is inseparable from fraternity, justice and faithfulness to others." (LS 70) But the Noah narrative also opens up an encouraging perspective for the future through God's interaction with a single human being: for thus it is possible "through Noah... to open a path of salvation. ... All it takes is one good person to restore hope!" (LS 71)

Klaus Vondung observed a "docked apocalyptic" in many texts of the secular environmental movement as early as the 1980s (Klaus Vondung 1988, 12). One thinks in apocalyptic doomsday scenarios, but has no perspective of hope, as it belongs to classical Jewish and Christian apocalyptic thinking. Pope Francis is animated by hope in his environmental encyclical: "Hope would have us recognize that there is always a way out, that we can always redirect our steps, that we can always do something to solve our problems." (LS 61) Even in the most difficult times, "the faithful would once again find consolation and hope in a growing trust in the all-powerful God... The God who created the universe out of nothing can also intervene in this world and overcome every form of evil. Injustice is not invincible" (LS 74). And so he concludes the encyclical with an urgent wish: "May our struggles and our concern for this planet never take away the joy of our hope." (LS 244)

7.3.3 "Laudato si'" as gentle apocalypticism

For a papal pronouncement, the tone of the encyclical is strikingly apocalyptic. This undoubtedly has to do with the fact that the Pope sides with the powerless, the poor and disadvantaged people and the desecrated earth. He considers their situation hopeless without serious changes, and so he cries out with them for a change in conditions.

More than the encyclical's rational, scientifically based content, it is this emotional, urgent and motivating tone that distinguishes the letter and was also publicly perceived. The greatest gain of the encyclical does not therefore lie in new insights in terms of content. In terms of natural science, the Pope can only adopt what the overwhelming majority of experts agree on anyway. Theologically, too, much has been achieved in the last two decades, which the Pope adopts and summarises. The big plus is what Francis himself states as the goal of his letter: "More than in ideas or concepts as such, I am interested in how such a spirituality can motivate us to a more passionate concern for the protection of our world. A commitment this lofty cannot be sustained by doctrine alone, without a spirituality capable of inspiring us, without an 'interior impulse which encourages, motivates, nourishes and gives meaning to our individual and communal activity' (EG 261)." (LS 216) There is no question that this passion is intensely palpable from the first to the last page.

Apocalypticism always thinks in cosmic dimensions that reach beyond the boundaries of a group or religion. It does not need to be emphasised that this transboundary character also characterises the encyclical. Finally, the glaring focus on what is identified as a key problem for the future of humanity is apocalyptic in character and at the same time belongs to the heart of the Christian mission: "Living our vocation to be protectors of God's handiwork ... is not an optional or a secondary aspect of our Christian experience." (LS 217) Responsibility for fellow creatures and the common house of Creation is part of the core of the Judeo-Christian faith, which perceives nature as a gift on loan from God. This thought, which is only explicitly expressed in the one quoted passage, is the underlying understanding of the encyclical.

7.4 *The added value of a theology of conversion for the project of the great transformation*

At the end of this chapter, let us ask about the added value of a theology of conversion for environmental ethics. Of course, sociological, political and economic analyses are necessary to identify and elucidate unjust "structures of sin" (chapter 8). They cannot be replaced by theology. However, theology makes a genuine contribution, which becomes outstandingly visible in the paradigm of ecological conversion. More than the sociological talk of the great transformation, the theological talk of conversion makes it clear:

- It is possible—"yes, we can!" Even with a lower standard of living, we are gifted people and will certainly achieve not less, possibly even more quality of life (chapter 9).
- It is urgent—time is running out! The emotionality that resonates in the call to convert makes this urgency more palpable (not more visible!) than the rational analysis of the natural and social sciences. Apocalyptic images of terror reinforce it. Such images are necessary and belong to truthfulness. The "globalisation of indifference" (EG 54) thus becomes more clearly recognisable as the greatest psychological obstacle to a great transformation.
- We are free from the pressure to succeed and from this freedom we can act all the more decisively. As much as conversion theology pushes and pressures, it also conveys the message: "Stick to your commitment and don't get side-tracked!" Act quickly and decisively, but don't look at whether your actions make any difference on a global scale! There is a lot of "committed serenity" in the call to repentance (chapter 10).

On the website of the Mercator Research Institute for Global Commons and Climate Change (MCC), there is a CO₂ clock (<https://www.mcc-berlin.net/forschung/co2-budget.html>). This clock runs backwards and shows how much carbon dioxide the world's community is still allowed to emit if it wants to reach the Paris target of 1.5 to a maximum of 2 degrees. After a short time, you can no longer stand to look at this clock emotionally. A feeling of trepidation arises, and that is intentional. Perhaps without reflecting on it, the MCC is using apocalyptic methods here. This is a good thing—we need the drastic warning in order to take action—and yet one has to be careful not to end up in a "docked apocalyptic" situation. Apocalypses undertake a tightrope walk.

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They want to activate to the maximum—and yet must not make themselves dependent on success. For this tightrope walk, spirituality of ecological conversion is a great help. It can provide the necessary freedom from giddiness that is indispensable on an exposed ridge.