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“SIGNS OF THE TIMES” – A THEOLOGICAL BASIS OF ECOTHEOLOGY AND THE CHRISTIAN COMPETENCE WITHIN THE FRAME OF THE ENVIRONMENTAL DISCOURSE

1. ECOLOGICAL AWARENESS AS “SIGN OF THE TIMES”

1.1 Is Ecological Awareness Part of the “Signs of the Times”?

A theology of the “signs of the times”¹ interprets **the present in prophetic terms as God’s calling**: It addresses the challenges and upheavals of each historical

1 The theology of the signs of the times initially emerged in the 1920s within a Protestant context (Tillich et al.). After formative development in the field of Catholic theology amongst others, for instance through the French “Nouvelle Théologie”, it had a major influence on the program of the First Vatican Council (“Opening up to the modern world”) as well as the socio-ethical Pastoral Constitution “Gaudium et spes”; cf. Sander 2005, 581-886; Ruggieri 2006. Ostheimer 2008.

situation in order to seek within these situations **the hidden presence of God** who has revealed himself and newly reveals himself as our companion. The texts by the Second Vatican Council postulate God's acting throughout history (cf. Hünemann 2006, 3)². Accordingly, **history is considered to be a dialogue between God and the Church** on the latter's peregrination through time. Faith is *interpretatio temporis*: i.e. interpretation of existence, and not simply the adherence to archaic truths. The signs of the times are traced back to the ministry of the Holy Spirit in history. "In deciphering and interpreting the signs of the times, the Church then perceives direction and **guidance by the Holy Spirit** who challenges the Church to embark upon new paths and new ways of behaving within their faith." (Hünemann 2006, 2).

The signs of the times raise those questions and inquiries of life whose quest for answers **enables revelation to become accessible in a liberating and meaningful manner**. By listening to man's experiences and contributing to the interpretation of the signs of the times and the quest for answers, faith becomes alive and acquires a contemporary testimonial character (Ibidem, 25)³.

According to the **Bible** (Matthew 16,3: *semeia ton kairon*, Luke 12,56: *ton kairon touton*), the "signs" are not factual historical reality as such but rather God-given *kairos* manifesting itself in reality. In ecological terms one can conclude the following: The challenges of the ecological crisis can only be considered "signs of the times" in the context of the upheavals and departures toward **a new awareness and transformation of mind, e.g.** a new awareness of **global neighborhood and fraternity** and a sense of man and his fellow creatures being companions in fate has emerged. Many people are searching in new ways for the normative meaning of nature and for "God's imprints" therein.

A criteriology is necessary in order to distinguish the historical exegesis of existence within the context of faith from an adaptation to the *Zeitgeist* (mainstream-thinking) and in order to purify it from historical contingencies and ideological influences⁴:

(1) Signs of the times are those phenomena that shape an era due to their **universality and frequency**. Signs of the times are characteristic for the distinctive-

2 Ruggieri 2006, 6-9 emphatically points to the fact that we are lacking a theological hermeneutics of the history of the Second Vatican and in some cases the history up to today. This is why the theology of the signs of the times is disoriented and unable to unfold its complex consequences.

3 If faith comes from hearing as Peter Knauer postulates, the dynamics of prophecies go into reverse: it is not important to present finished answers, rather it is crucial to have the ability to listen sensitively to people's experiences and longings. Knauer 2015.

4 The following attempt to create a criteriology of the signs of the times has been significantly inspired by Hünemann 2006, Sander 2005 and Ruggieri 2006. No claim is made to completeness.

ly new conflict situations within each historical context. Moreover, they refer to an epochal process of change that is historically significant. They do not only concern individual groups and their interests but **mankind as a whole**. They are universally meaningful for the development and future of mankind.

(2) Signs of the times relate to **essential questions of human existence** that express the hardships and longings of a certain time. They are not man's projections of desire but rather emanate from experiences of suffering, failure and brokenness in which the longing for God's salvific intervention becomes apparent *sub contrario*. The signs of the times are an outcry in which the ministry of the Holy Spirit, the entire profoundness of cross and resurrection, and the experience of suffering and hope manifest themselves. The signs of the times relate to questions concerning fate and salvation that encompass man's entire life and self-conception.

(3) Signs of the times are **not historical facts and natural phenomena as such but rather the ensuing changes in man's awareness**. Triggered by emergency situations and challenges, man's awakening to new ways of understanding, new guidelines and standards shapes the referential character of signs. They are experiences through which God's spirit expands into new forms of expressing faith and humanity. To "**experience the experience**", which can transform an emergency situation into a salvific experience, is a constitutive element. The complex relation between faith, religious experience and the exegesis of existence is the hermeneutical key for a theology of the signs of the times (cf. Hünemann 2006, 9-12; Ruggieri 2006, 70).

(4) The signs of the times refer to crises that **necessitate a human decision**. They enable a new level of differentiation between justice and injustice. Moreover, they offer freedom in that humans can get rid of old boundaries and dependencies and chose between salvation and misery.

According to these criteria, the ecological crisis as such is not a sign of the times unless Church and society experience God within this crisis. Church and society have to learn anew that a "culture of life" (John Paul II) can only grow when human beings respect the nature in and around them as a gift from God with intrinsic value. From a theological perspective, these crisis phenomena are ambivalent in so far as taken individually they tend to lead to anxieties that might manifest themselves in violent reactions. A crisis phenomenon becomes a "sign" (semeion) when it reveals the possibility for man to make a decision for God and life. In its original literal sense (Greek: *krinein* decide), a crisis is not primarily something negative, rather it is a decision situation that can lead to essential elucidations.

Under these premises a theological diagnosis of the times with regard to the phenomena that are emerging in the course of the ecosocial crisis generally goes

beyond scaremongering worst-case scenarios. In fact it also perceives signs indicating new departures that enable it to transform radical change and upheaval into the *kairos* (the right moment) of liberation from false notions⁵. Within the context of ecology, the modern age is often construed as history of decay, but this view is not compatible with the theology of the signs of the times. The theological reason for the repudiation of the theory of decay is not an optimistic downplaying of problems but rather the **trust that God is present even in the upheavals and errors of human history.**

1.2 Hearing Creation`s Outcry – Religious Experiences with and within the Ecological Crisis

An approach to ecological questions that is shaped by the theology of the signs of the times understands the **ecological crisis as an existential questioning of the faith that creation is a blessed habitat for all creatures.** In a pressing manner, the question regarding God’s liberating and promising presence within his creation is greatly relevant today. The **Christian promise of salvation and liberation for all people and the entire creation (Romans 8) is not reconcilable with indifference** and phlegm towards the fate of fellow creatures. The Church truly fulfils its calling when it partakes in the quest for solutions “for the most urgent questions of our times” (Gaudium et Spes 10) and identifies these questions as signs of experiencing God.

Against this backdrop, an ecology-oriented theology of the signs of the times perceives **the ecological crisis in a very specific way as “revelation”**⁶, i.e. as God’s calling to his Church. Whoever hears the outcry of this maltreated creation that **crucifies the cosmic Christ every day anew** (cf. Fox 1991) does not seek redemption beyond this creatural reality but with and within it. Christian hope is not directed toward redemption from creatural reality but toward its salutary **transformation** (cf. Romans 8, 21). In times of crisis, believers in God’s promise of a future for mankind and the entire creation have to bring to mind God’s auspicious power through

5 This argumentative structure can be found in almost all of the mostly short but overall relatively numerous statements by Pope John Paul II on ecological questions: He unfailingly connects the description of the crisis to the growing awareness for ecological questions, a development that he praises as being a departure into a new era. It is only in this framework that the crisis phenomenon becomes a “sign of the times”; cf. for example Johannes Paul II, 1989, no. 1. This structure is by no means specifically Catholic; it also shapes the approach of the ecumenical movement worldwide; the introduction by Reuver/ Solms/ Huizer 1993 is significant for this approach. It starts out stating: “Crisis upon crisis affects today’s world. This, however, is nothing new. Humankind throughout history has seen crisis periods of various kinds. They often were the forerunners of a new era” (ibid. 9).

6 The Indian theologian Raimon Panikkar characterizes the ecological crisis as “revelation“ in the sense of a liberating liminal experience; Panikkar 1996.

the testimony of love. **There can be no future for mankind beyond the responsibility for his fellow human beings and fellow creatures.**

In the context of ecology, **a new kind of interest in religious questions is emerging** (Gabriel 1994, 157-163)⁷. This constitutes a sign of the times. The new interest is driven by a quest for that which sustains life and promises a future in the new geological epoch which is called “**anthropocene**”⁸. At the same time, **elements from something like an esoteric religion** have to be critically exposed in the modern environmental movement, particularly when equilibrium or harmony models are normatively adapted and misinterpreted as “doctrines of salvation.” (Trepl 1991). Nature is increasingly occupying a new and very significant spot in our construction of meaning. **Society’s desire for devotion has partially shifted from religion to nature** (cf. Bolz 2019). All this has to be critically exposed and constructively expanded towards a truly transcendental horizon. Such a horizon cannot be found in ecology; however, being a truth seeking movement that emanates from the breaches and turmoils of our times, the environmental movement can offer multifarious, **fascinating and inspiring bridges towards this transcendental horizon**. The **ecology of time**, i.e. the rediscovery of the dimensions and rhythms of creation, could be a good starting point⁹. In the context of ecology, there is a quest for the origins, conditions and sustainment of life. This quest can be interpreted as a **modern variant of the question of transcendence** and should be critically expanded.

When dealing with these issues, **theology has to remain true to its fundamental values**, i.e. defend man’s dignity within the frame of his mission concerning integral development¹⁰. Theology’s ecological dimension that also includes the recognition of the intrinsic value of fellow creatures has to be established anew today. The theological perspective on ethical, anthropological and human-ecological contexts can be an important corrective, especially in today’s segmented society. On the other hand, the awareness of the complex interconnectedness between different areas of society and science, an awareness that has grown within the context of ecology, constitutes a challenge for further developments in the field of theological ethics.

7 “The systematically generated plethora of contingencies – this is the argument of this paragraph – creates a new need for religion [...]; it thus presents the Christian tradition with a new conflict and challenge” (ibid. 158). Cf. Taylor 2007, Chapter 8.

8 Cf. for this fundamental diagnosis of our time and the role of religions in it: Deane-Drummond/Bergmann/Vogt 2017; Haber/Held//Vogt 2016.

9 Henrici interprets the order of time as the central motif of the Jewish-Christian tradition; cf. Henrici 2002.

10 On the topos of the holistic and integral development cf. Paul VI 1967, no. 6-11: on the recognition of the dignity of fellow creatures as expression and consequence of a definition of man’s dignity that is based on theocentrism and interpreted from the perspective of ethics of responsibility cf. Münk 1997.

1.3 Kairological Sensitivity for Overcoming Problems of Perception

Methodologically, the theology of the “signs of the times“ most notably manifests itself in the **triad “see-judge-act“** (*Gaudium et spes* 4). For ethics, this means a reversal of the traditionally deductive methodology: it does **not start with the deduction** of norms and postulates from theological axioms but rather sets in with a description of the situation¹¹.

Initially the autonomous inherent logic of ecological, social and economic facts and circumstances has to be taken seriously instead of being skipped over by glib theologization. In compliance with this approach, ethics seeks to analyse thoroughly these phenomena from a philosophical, theological and epistemological perspective in order to facilitate an in-depth understanding of the underlying patterns regarding the perception of the world, construction of meaning and action orientation. In ethics, a theology of the signs of the times leads to a more **inductive approach**.

1.4 Résumé: The “Ecological Calling” of Christians

The eco-social crisis phenomena are “signs of the times” insofar as **they constitute a new understanding of the world and the values of civilization** and are perceived in the light of the gospel.

Carl Amery articulates the **Church’s new “civilizing mission”** in the age of globalization in a highly dramatic manner:

“The future of mankind is at stake. How can the earth be preserved as a habitable planet? Which contribution can the Christian Churches make in order to recapture a perspective for our descendants? [...] It is foreseeable that our environment will collapse and be rendered uninhabitable in the course of the new millennium. This process is accelerated and made irreversible due to the unmitigated market that [...] is using up all natural resources and does not offer any alternative system [...] (As a result it is turned into an) ideology and a substitute for religion. [...] **The Churches will very soon sink into complete insignificance and can only regain their vitality and salvific relevance by accepting their civilizing mission to work on a sustainable, biospherically responsible culture.**“ (Amery 2002, cover)¹²

11 Ultimately there is an unbreakable hermeneutic circle between the epistemological preconditions, the theological and ethical axioms as well as the description of reality, but the shift of emphasis in the ethical methodology through the triad “see-judge-act“ should not be ignored.

12 Amery specifies this by means of calling for a “fight against the religion of the unmitigated market“ as an “exodus from slavery of global capitalism“. However, a differentiation is necessary if the criticism of capitalism in turn is not to become a substitute for religion.

In the words of Pope John Paul II.: An “**ecological calling**” and appointment to all Christians “that is more urgent in our times than ever before” arises from God’s instruction to man regarding His creation (Johannes Paul II. 2002, no. 1).

2. CHRISTIAN COMPETENCE WITHIN THE FRAME OF THE ENVIRONMENTAL DISCOURSE

There are especially six specific competences and normative approaches of the churches for an integral and sustainable development in accordance with responsibility for creation:

- It is a matter of **long-term thinking**, a practice that the church is inherently predestined for due to its focus on God’s eternity.
- The church is the **oldest “global player”** and thereby especially qualified for global responsibility which is today a prerequisite for overcoming the ecological crisis.
- The Christian concept of man does **not determine man’s value from the amount of produced and consumed goods** and can therefore enable a moderate, fair and responsible handling of these goods.
- The belief in creation **not only aims at moral appeals**, but also at a **meaningful communication** that considers ecological responsibility to be **part of man’s self-respect**.
- The integration of the Christian view on environmental issues within **cultural and social contexts** makes it quite unique. Protecting nature and man form a unified whole for Christian ethics.

The **churches have enormous potential** within the discourse on the environment and the future; however, this potential is **concealed by the dominant fears** of getting involved in the ecological discourse. Christians are hiding their light under a bushel (compare Matthew 5:15). The majority in the church seems to ignore its responsibility for creation beyond non-binding moral appeals. When are European believers going to **wake up** in order to discover and evolve their own ecological heritage? **Dialogue is what makes religious faith alive**. Only when the church meets the current challenges will it be able to make important contributions toward a sustainable development. Time is pressing.

What we need is nothing less than a **second enlightenment**, this time not as emancipation from religion, but as enlightenment about the ecological and cultural foundations of life (Weizsäcker/Wijkman 2018). It includes a **deep shift in mind re-**

garding the relationship between science and values. Pope Francis addresses this as “**cultural revolution**” (Franziskus 2017). The advisory board “Global Change” of the German Government demands a new social contract for a great transformation (WBGU 2011).

2.1 *Laudato si’* as a catalyst for transformation Christian ethics

The encyclical *Laudato si’* is a radical chance of societal teaching of the Catholic Church and possible **catalyst of a revolution in Christian “mind maps”**. Its most important part is the writing about spirituality to discover the hidden presence of God in our time, in beauty but also the suffering of nature and the poor, an intercultural concept of “*boon vivir*” (good life) and a new quality of dialogue with ecosystems sciences.

Laudato si’ is a **new chapter in the development of Catholic social teaching**. For the first time, the complex topic of the ecological challenge is be dealt with comprehensively at the level of the papal textbooks. Its central theme is the postulate of a “**integral ecology**”, which ties in with the phrase “integral development” from the encyclical “*Populorum progressio*” (1967). For the first time, however, it consistently places this under the claim of ecological renewal. Without such a renewal that pervades all fields of action, neither global and intergenerational justice nor humane technology can be thought of today.

The central guidelines of the encyclical are (Cf. Vogt 2021, 242-245):

- (a) **Time is of the essence**, ecological capacities are largely exhausted, and for countless people existential questions of survival are at stake;
- (b) There is a fundamental **relationship between environmental and equity issues**; global and intergenerational justice cannot be achieved without environmental protection; at the same time, environmental protection must start from the legitimate interests of the poor;
- (c) To hear the **cry of creation and of the poor and to respond to it** with an appropriate practice of responsibility is an **immediate practice of faith** and an inescapable task of the Church today;
- (d) In order to solve the ecological crisis, **uncomfortable questions of power**, corruption and systemic undesirable developments must be addressed;
- (e) The Christian tradition of **anthropocentrism (people-centeredness) must be questioned and differentiated** in such a way that the intrinsic value of creation and the existential connectedness of all creatures is fully recognized;

- (f) Each and every one of us is called to an “**ecological reversal**”, a change of direction in the way of life and economy.

Laudato si' does **not enfold a systematic approach to ethical reflection**. Its concept of “integral ecology” is ambivalent, more mythopoetic, arguing on different levels and it lets open crucial questions in the context of its consequences in the context of political ethics. It's an academic duty in the reception of *Laudato si'* to make up this leeway in order to have a concept for solving the many antagonisms between socioeconomic, political and ecological claims. This includes an interdisciplinary approach of understanding theology of creation as fundament of today's ethics of nature and a systematic enlargement of the concept of social principles.

A specific Christian interpretation of **sustainability** could help to prepare such a systematic approach; core for this approach is the context of the other ethical principles of Catholic Social teaching. The new encyclical *Fratelli tutti* adds a deep connection between solidarity and sustainability (Franziskus 2020). A decisive challenge for the implementation of ecological solidarity including future generations for Poland is, in particular, the energy supply by turning away from fossil fuels and thus from coal.

Catholic tradition needs to learn in this context from other traditions of protestant and orthodox Churches and other religions and also in the dialogue with modern philosophy of nature and ecosystem sciences. One of the most important impulses of *Laudato si'* is the method of consequent dialogue and the role of Church not only teaching but also learning. **If *Laudato si'* should be a catalyst for societal transformation the church itself** has to be the change which it expects for society. Such an “inner revolution” is a deep chance for renewal faith and religious language, for ecumenical cooperation and an encounter with people, who discover in a new way the relevance of religion in the context of ecology. **With its attentive reading the signs of the times *Laudato si'* a signpost for new Christian ecotheology.**

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SUMMARY

The essay formulates four criteria for identifying the topos “signs of the times” and applies them for a specific Christian understanding of the ecological crisis. The aim of the argumentation is to decide why and in what way climate change, ecological degradation but also the new awareness of the value of nature is a theological issue. The second part of the essay deals with the question which competence the churches can contribute to the ecological discourse of a pluralistic, partly secular or atheistic society. I speak also about the encyclical *Laudato si’*.

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