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“And God saw that it was good”: ecothology and ecclesial environmental work

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Theology has, also as result of the critique directed at it, undergone an ecologization that takes shape in ecotheology. It is theology's attempt to deliver answers to the ecological crisis. These answers are substantively different compared to approaches in other academic fields and could provide the spiritual foundation that is so urgently needed. For ecotheology to move beyond its academic and theoretical character, it needs a Church that implements and lives according to ecotheological ideas. Only the Church can reach a large number of faithful and influence society at large. By conducting a case study of two Roman Catholic dioceses in Germany, this text analyzes how ecotheology is implemented in an ecclesial context. It finds that there is a huge potential for Christian faith to contribute with relevant answers to today's ecological questions. The investigation shows, however, two major difficulties. Firstly, the Church, that is a vital part of ecotheology, often faces organizational difficulties that prevent stronger progress in the implementation of ecotheological ideas. For abstract ecotheology to become lived reality, it needs to go thru an administrating and practical process that sometimes causes the practical impact to decrease. Secondly, neither the Church nor religion in general are the superior systems in society but rationalized economy and technology. The Church can only act within that framework even though that very framework often prevents a more thorough implementation of ecotheology as there are basic contradictions in the life of Jesus Christ and current economic reasoning.

Keywords: ecotheology, anthropocentrism, creation, Catholic Church, Christianity and nature, human ecology

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I Introduction

The ecological crisis we are facing is a global crisis and thus has, after the development of an ecological awareness starting in the 1970s (Bergmann 1995:67), mobilized actors from different social and geographical contexts that address the issue from their respective backgrounds. These voices are quite diverse and range from academics of different subjects to entrepreneurs, politicians, engineers and activists or a combination of these. A group that is not so much thought of as being an important participant in the environmental debate are the Christian Churches.¹ Indeed, as Barker (2010:11) acknowledges, “Bible users had very little to contribute” in the time of the formation of ecological awareness.

This is surprising for at least two reasons. Firstly, Christian Churches, especially the Catholic one, unite millions of people across the planet. It can be described as a very global and very local organization. This can be related to the environmental crisis that is “global in scope and local in impact” (Tucker & Grim 2001:5). While global environmental policies are urgently needed, they often fail because of differing national interests and thus become ineffective. National borders are not that important for a community of believers which would make a much more promising field of policy implementation.

Secondly, our ecological crisis can be approached from the standpoint that it is mainly a spiritual crisis as it is about what we think how we can treat nature and in what relation humans and nature should interact with each other. From this perspective, the spiritual crisis would precede all other crises created by different fields. How we form for example technology, economy or society in relation to nature ultimately reveals our spiritual ideas and convictions. In order to neglect nature in our economic life, which has undoubtedly been the case (Daly & Farley 2011:24), we would first need to cut off our spiritual relationship to it.

Therefore, it could be expected that a spiritual crisis is addressed by spiritual institutions from the very beginning. However, this was not the case and adding to that, some argue that Christianity can be blamed for having caused this spiritual crisis. They would thus see the involvement of the Christian Churches in the environmental debate as questionable at best and as absolutely unacceptable at worst.

On the other hand, there are theologians who develop a Christian view towards nature that is also able to convincingly address the ecological crisis. This field is known as ecological theology or ecotheology. Church and theology are in a close relationship with each other and theology can be seen as having a “decisive directive role in the Church” (Schwöbel 2005:274). This developing ecotheology is very likely the reason why many Roman Catholic dioceses in Germany have established environmental departments or nominated a responsible person for environmental questions, a so-called environmental officer (German: Umweltbeauftragte/r). This means that the Catholic Church has institutionalized environmental work. This does not only seriously question those statements that ascribe Christianity a low ecologic focus but also opens up possibilities that were not thought of before and that this essay will address.

I.1 Aim

This essay deals with ecclesial environmental work. The term consists of three different parts, each emphasizing a certain aspect of the whole. “Ecclesial” means that it is the Church that is the actor. The Church is an institution that is substantially different compared to other societal institutions. Its basis is Christian faith, so its argumentation needs to be related to Christian sources of knowledge. “Environmental” is about the relationship of human beings and nature, the word is a relational expression (Weichhart 2016:1090). As faith cannot exist without humans, any Christian approach to nature cannot be separated from human beings. “Work” in

¹ “Church” referring to the community of the faithful or to the religious institution is written with a capitalized “c” in this text. If the building is referred to, small letters are used.

this case means the deliberate institutionalization of environmental questions that probably lead to very specific outcomes.

Drawing from investigations of two German dioceses, this essay approaches the environmental work of the Catholic Church in Germany focusing on the link between environment, ecotheology and the Church as institution.

The overarching research question is: *How does the structure of the Roman Catholic Church and its position within society enable and limit aspirations of making ecotheology more practical?* As will be discussed in more detail below, ecotheology is theological or at least philosophical in nature. There is a risk that it does not reach the faithful with its very abstract thoughts remaining purely academic and irrelevant for most. But if coordinated by an institutional branch, it could be put into practice and thus become more tangible. The question also takes into consideration that Christian faith always is a communal faith (Schwöbel 2005:274) and that the Church as well as society play important roles in that. The Church is only one actor within society and by far not the predominant one. Only focusing on individual believers is not enough as it does not take the collective and institutionalized dimension of faith into consideration.

The following sub-questions help to guide the research. The first one is: *How does ecotheology take shape in ecclesial environmental work?* This question is a more practical one as it aims at finding out how the Church itself approaches environmental awareness within its own geographical and social context.

As “anthropocentrism” has been a major accusation towards Christianity, as will be shown below, the second sub-question addresses the relationship of anthropocentrism and ecotheology by asking *How does practiced ecotheology relate to anthropocentrism?*

These questions are relevant both from a theoretical and practical point of view. In theory, it contributes with a more nuanced understanding of how Christianity and nature are related, especially paying attention to the dynamics within the Church. In practice, it can be enlightening to analyze an ecclesial approach as the ecological crisis forces us to think in broader terms taking many perspectives into consideration. But also, as the crisis requires urgent acting and finding solutions that are feasible within our current social context.

2 Theoretical background

2.1 Christianity and nature: the beginning of the discussion

Hitzhusen (2007:56) argues that two participants have severely contributed to the general public’s skepticism towards Christianity’s potential for fighting the environmental crisis. It makes sense, to start with them first when we are to approach the relationship between Christianity and nature. One explores certain characteristics of Christianity and their potential contribution to the exploitation of nature, the other investigates these ideas from a social scientific perspective trying to give them a quantitative framework. Of course, one happened after the other. Here, we look at both in their chronological order.

The first participant, to use Hitzhusen’s expression, is White (1967) who, by looking at the technological development in Western Europe during the middle ages, concludes that Western technology “outstripped Islam and Byzantium” (1967:1204) well before the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. He also notes that both “modern science and modern technology are distinctively *Occidental*” (ibid., italics his). As this path of technological development and domination started, according to him, in the middle ages, it is necessary to examine the cultural context of that time. How people treat nature is dependent on their ideas about it and these ideas came from religion (ibid.:1205). Here, he takes an idealistic perspective seeing ideas as the instigator of certain societal structures and not the other way around. Conditions that made

technological and scientific development thrive must be searched for in the idealistic context of that time, which was Christianity. According to White, Christianity has characteristics that make it “the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen” (ibid.). Among these he names the fact that Adam was created at the end of the creation process (Gen 1:26) leading to the idea that the entire world was made for man’s benefit and rule. Man is also made in God’s image which makes him distinctively different from the rest of creation legitimizing his rule of power on earth. The central passage in the Bible is: “God blessed them, saying to them, ‘Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and subdue it. Be masters of the fish of the sea, the birds of heaven and all the living creatures that move on earth.’” (Gen 1:28, NJB)². A clear hierarchy is shown, and humans are ascribed the role of masters of the earth. It could indeed be seen as the divine order to dominate the entire planet. Amery (1984:15) adds that it is entirely up to humans how they fulfill this task which in consequence surrenders the entire creation to human exploitation.

Amery also mentions the middle ages as playing an important role in Christianity’s domination of nature (ibid.:93). But he focuses more on the developing monastery culture resulting in a work ethic both in Catholicism and Protestantism. Christian asceticism was the necessary condition for an ethic based on individual performance.

Christianity as religion caused pagan animism to vanish (White 1967:1205). In animism, all living and nonliving parts of the environment are thought to have a spirit (Nash 1989:90). Once animism disappeared in Western Europe, the strict dualism of nature and man allowed for the exploitation of nature without bad conscience (White 1967:1205). God was not perceived as part of nature but as being outside of it. This could also be linked to Christianity’s character of a missionizing religion. As many indigenous societies practice animism and are commonly viewed as living in harmony with nature, their encounter with Christians and their later adoption of the new religion might have seriously unsettled their inherited balanced relationship to nature. Therefore, ecological destruction could take place at different places around the globe making the ecological crisis a global one, but its ideological basis would originally derive from Western Europe. This clear divide between non-divine nature and humans enabled the current way of doing science. Humans could approach their study objects with an entirely different neutrality. However, scientists were still guided by religious motivations until the late 18th century (ibid.:1206). Grant (2000:291) develops this point saying that God did not play a role in modern scientific achievements by for example Newton. But God was there in the background as Creator, as a source of inspiration. One could say that by understanding the natural laws or by dedicating efforts into scientific research, a better understanding of God the Creator was gained.

Nash (1989) adds some additional possible ideas that White did not mention. Christianity does not believe in metempsychosis (ibid:91). That means that the soul never goes back into a different being once a person died. By that, animals or plants can never have a link to human beings as they can never possess the soul of a former human. This idea is probably most prevalent among Native Americans (Anderson 1996:57).

Also, wilderness in the sense of nature free from any human manipulation is not considered divine but more like an enemy to be tamed (Nash 1989:91). It is first after human treatment that nature can fulfill its task of serving mankind whose needs have absolute priority. Unfortunately, Nash does not give any biblical examples to illustrate what he means, but we can look at some passages that deal with wilderness. As stories of the Bible take place in the Eastern Mediterranean basin, the most prevalent climate zones are arid. Deserts or unfertile land are common. In Deuteronomy referring to the Israelites’ wandering out of Egypt, it says: “who guided you through this vast and dreadful desert, a land of fiery snakes, scorpions, thirst; who

² The abbreviations next to bible quotations in this text denote common English bible translations.

NJB=New Jerusalem Bible

RSV=Revised Standard Version

KJV=King James Version

in this waterless place brought you water out of the flinty rock” (Dt 8:15-16, NJB). The landscape is presented as something to be afraid of because of its animal inhabitants and because of its lack to provide for human survival. Because the Israelites are used to land of harsh conditions for humans, an apathy of what happens to one’s surroundings might have developed especially when the environment is described as dangerous. Human civilization would make the land less dangerous. In the New Testament we find “Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil” (Mt 4:1, KJV). The desert as a place without any humans is depicted as region of demons (Riede 2012:3) and in general a place that people avoided (ibid.:1).

Another characteristic is Christianity’s focus on redemption (Nash 1989:91). It is commonly acknowledged that the “doctrine of redemption has been celebrated in liturgy and preaching far more often than the doctrine of creation” (Barbour 2000:385). Christians await the kingdom of God and see the earth as a temporary place to dwell in. With Jesus, “the kingdom of God is close at hand” (Mk 1:15, NJB). Some of Jesus’ parables deal with preparing for the coming kingdom. One example is the parable of the ten virgins. In the parable, the five virgins who did not buy enough oil to come to meet the bridegroom at night are accused of being unprepared. The final part in the parable is a warning to be prepared for the coming kingdom: “So stay awake, because you do not know either the day or the hour.” (Mt 25:13, NJB). It makes sense then that Christians did not expect the earth to last long which can be taken as a justification not to care about nature or not to look at one’s treatment of nature from a long-term perspective. If the kingdom of God comes anyways and tremendously changes earth, it would not make any difference whether a forest is cut down or not. Indeed, it might even lead to the order of taking whatever is possible “while supplies last”.

It is the combination of these characteristics that makes the argument of Christianity’s “huge burden of guilt” (White 1967:1206) convincing. White never mentions any Christian denomination specifically, he only exempts the Eastern Christian Church. Worster (1994:27) by referring to White, on the other hand, points to Roman Catholicism and Puritanism as the most ignorant religious groups regarding ecological well-being. He does not elaborate why he mentions just these two groups that he himself identifies as quite opposing in many other regards. Puritanism’s relation to nature will be analyzed in the next section. As Roman Catholicism is the main focus of this text, a more detailed elaboration will not be undertaken here.

When it comes to Puritanism, the settlements on the American continent are usually mentioned (Amery 1972:97). Neuwirth (1986:51) shows that for Puritans there were two contrary regions in New England. On the one hand, the Puritan settlements that are considered to be a garden where faithful people conduct righteous work. On the other hand, beyond the settlements, there was wilderness which was inhabited by beasts and people who behaved like beasts (ibid.). God protects his chosen people in their garden from the dangers of the wilderness that surrounds it (ibid.:43). The Indians living in New England conducted rudimentary sedentary cultivation, a lifestyle that connects both hunting and gathering and land cultivation (ibid.:44). As their lifestyle was so opposing to the Puritan perspective it was not considered to be a worthy lifestyle at all. It only showed how the Indians themselves embody the dreadful wilderness that the Puritans wanted to displace. Thus, for the Puritans, wilderness is not a place of human absence but a place that did not bring forth a civilization being based on city life (ibid.:45). Neuwirth even suggests that the previously mentioned bible section of Jesus being tempted in the desert (Mt 4:1) is the equivalent of what the Puritans felt like in New England. This is interesting in itself as one could have argued that there is a difference of desert being depicted as wilderness and depicting New England forest as wilderness. While the first one cannot provide for many people and is indeed quite dangerous for inexperienced, the latter could be viewed as more appealing. To a contemporary reader, hot desert and cold ice landscapes would probably be the most terrifying, as both regions demand a highly specialized adaptation for humans to survive

in them. This conclusion, however, would be too simplified and Neuwirth makes it plausible that wilderness as a dangerous, anti-human place can be perceived in any region as long as there are strong religious ideas in people's minds. In this case, the Puritans being reminded of Jesus' walk into the desert, accused all Indians to collaborate with the devil in order to seduce them as the new settlers (ibid.:48). The uncivilized parts of America were therefore the devil's wilderness. The Puritan vision of wilderness legitimized the subjugation of Indians and their territories (ibid.:44) and also the large-scale ecologic degradation that accompanied it.

2.2 Sociological reactions

2.2.1 Sociological investigations of the Christianity-nature-relationship

The earliest reactions from social scientists understood White's ideas as a hypothesis to be tested. They are what Hitzhusen refers to as the second participants to foster skepticism towards Christianity's ecological potential. In these cases, social science makes use of correlation tables and looks for statistically significant correlations. Thus, the research is entirely quantitative. One of these articles is exemplarily summarized here. Hand & Van Liere (1984) take White's ideas as the starting point of their research. They argue that the individual level needs to be taken into consideration when assessing White's hypothesis. Someone belonging to the Judeo-Christian religions would feel more comfortable with the idea of mastery over nature and would thus feel less concerned about environmental problems (ibid.:556). They approach this hypothesis by conducting a mail survey in an American state measuring the participants' religious affiliation (the Church they belong to), religious commitment (how often they attend services) and Likert scales of the degree of agreement to environment-related issues (ibid.:558). Their results suggest that non-Judeo-Christians are more concerned about environmental questions also agreeing more with for example environmental regulations and government spending on environmental issues. All religious groups score lower than non-Judeo-Christians in environmental awareness which Hand & Van Liere see as proof of White's analysis (ibid.:567). Church attendance decreases concern for environmental questions, even though the opposite is true for Episcopalians and Lutherans (ibid.:561). Religious characteristics contribute to the explanation of environmental concern even when taking other social characteristics such as age into consideration (ibid.:566-567). The presented R squared values indicate that about two percent of the variation of agreement of pollution control can be attributed to religious characteristics (ibid.:566). Population control receives the highest R squared value showing that agreement to population control can be explained by religious variables by eleven percent. However, they do not make clear in what way they consider the opinion about population control an environmental issue. A question that can be asked is that if the strongest correlation is found with a variable that is not even clearly related to environmental issues, are the other correlations then weak and thus negligible? Another interesting fact is that agreement with mastery over nature can be explained by religious denominations which means that a Judeo-Christian is more likely to agree with the idea that man should dominate earth. However, it seems that other variables (except population control) can only be explained by religious denomination to a much smaller degree such as pollution control, resource conservation and environmental regulation (ibid.:566). If Judeo-Christians are more likely to think that man should dominate earth, but share with non-Judeo-Christians quite similar opinions regarding environmental questions, what difference does it make? It seems that having belief is to be separated from putting the belief into action. It might very well be true that Christians agree to a larger extent that mankind should dominate the earth. But does that really lead to a concrete impact? The researchers' own results seem to contradict the idea of conviction equaling action. What the researchers do is challenging White's statement that Christianity (except Orthodoxy) is to blame for the ecological crisis by finding that there are differences among different religious groups (ibid.:561), producing a more nuanced picture of Christianity as stated by White. They do not disagree with him in the basic idea stating that Christians in general do not

show pro-environmental attitudes. However, they find it more useful to differentiate between liberal (e.g. Episcopalians and Methodists) and conservative denominations (e.g. Baptists and Mormons) to predict environmental concern (ibid.:568).

As this short review of a quantitative social science report has shown, social scientists have used White's statement to transform religion into a mere variable. All such studies come up with a conclusion but taken together they do not really contribute to a clearer understanding of the topic. Some results are even contradictory or negligible. In all papers, the United States is the main country of origin of most of the samples. This makes sense in so far as it is in the United States where a large variety of Christian denominations can be studied. But the American focus also seems to have led to the incorporation of individualism, namely the assumption that religion is a private matter like every other characteristic of a human being such as race, age or political affiliation. From that perspective, the researchers have highly individualized what it means to follow a religion. The investigation method does not allow for getting to know the interviewee and their circumstances as quantitative methods naturally emphasize generalization and explanation rather than deep understanding. The object of study is taken out of its context leaving a couple of variables to be analyzed assuming that all people can be grouped by their religion alone. Religion becomes a mere attribute to be measured by numbers. This might give a convincing impression for a scientific debate, but it does not lead to a deeper understanding which would be necessary in such a heavily debated question. Another problem with the main geographic focus on the United States is the question of the country's culture. One can argue that substitute religions such as consumerism or growthism are an integral part of American society. For example, the ecological footprint per person in the United States is among the highest in the world (WWF 2014:35). Environmental awareness is not really prevalent. If the differences between seculars and Judeo-Christians are not that extreme, then even secular Americans show quite an anti-environmental behavior as the entire country's resource use is high. Quantitative research also adds new dichotomous variables that make finding solutions even more complicated. According to Wilkinson (2010:55), categories such as "conservative/liberal, religious/secular, human/environment, and material/spiritual" restrict our ability to conceive of issues and find a response to them. Taking all that into consideration it does not seem surprising that Proctor & Berry (2005:1574) by reviewing major contributions in the field, conclude that the literature has been "inconclusive".

However, this should not divert from the fact that both White and sociologists of the 1980s and 1990s have delivered powerful justifications for a skepticism towards Christianity which is felt as still present today (Haluza-Delay 2008:72, Hitzhusen 2007:56).

Both contributions are different in nature. While the first one is an original idea, the second one is a reaction to it. It is only one possible reaction to it and many different fields have participated in the debate. But it seems indicative that as late as 2005, Proctor & Berry (2005:1575) still observe a lack of qualitative research in Christianity-and-nature analysis. As the problems connected to quantitative research have shown, qualitative research is needed to get a more thorough understanding.

2.2.2 The greening of religion

Nash (1989) coins the expression of the "greening of religion", that later on became the "greening-of-religion hypothesis" (Taylor et al. 2016:1002). Nash summarizes the developments in the American Christian Churches from the 1960s to the late 1980s also in relation to the statements made by White (1967). He gives an account of how pro-environmental ideas have been introduced into the major Christian Churches because of the work of ecotheologians. He finds that "in the 1970s and 1980s the ethics of the human-nature relationship became a major preoccupation of American theologians and, to a lesser extent, of ordinary churchgoers" (Nash 1989:98). He concludes that by the 1980s already, opinions that propagated man's dominance of the earth and the ruthless exploitation for one's own benefit

“sounded increasingly old-fashioned” (ibid.:120). Not only is his account a summary of American religions and their relationship to nature, it can also be considered as a concept that allows for further investigation. This has been done by quantitative research as one article even has Nash’s concept in its title (Eckberg & Blocker 1989). But if these articles only aim at investigating whether there are differences in individual’s attitudes and behaviors regarding the environment, one does not take into consideration, that, as Nash stated, within religion ecological thinking was more an issue for theologians rather than for laity. Another way to deal with the greening-of-religion hypothesis would be to qualitatively investigate how a certain religious community treats environmental issues in order to show how environmental ideas have manifested themselves within the community’s organization. This is done by, for example, Shibley & Wiggins (1997) who present how religious environmental activism takes shape in major American Churches (ibid.:334). They look at how the different denominations address religious environmental ethics and what action programs they have created. Even though their article remains rather descriptive they provide an overview of how interreligious coalitions that promote environmental action are formed and what each major religion has taken into its action programs.

By following the development of the Roman Catholic Church in North America, Warner (2008) aims to show “how religious leaders [...] conceptualize new knowledge [...] as having moral significance” (ibid.:113) and a response to that becomes a religious duty (ibid.). He shows that the Catholic bishops approach ecological questions from a social and economic justice perspective (ibid.:123). It also becomes clear that the greening of the American Catholic Church has been a constant interaction between the American bishops and their occupation with regional issues and the pope’s more general statements (ibid.:119). He then continues to look at regional initiatives in which local Catholic communities have been involved in a struggle for environmental justice. In the end he admits that the Catholic Church has gone thru a slow and modest greening process (ibid.:134) but that he sees the potential that the Church can make its stewardship vision practical for American culture (ibid.). His contribution looks at both the national level (of the episcopal conferences) and the global level (of the Holy See). American Catholicism does not become greener only by itself. It is also the Vatican that proclaims more ecologic thinking in its publications. So, the bishops are directly influenced and guided by the pope but can set own emphases within their country’s context. Warner’s (2008) contribution is only an analysis of the greening of one Christian denomination, but could be conducted for any other major religious group. The dynamics would be a bit different, no other group has a pope for example. But the motivation would probably be quite similar. By looking at religious environmental activism, Warner has also shown that the greening-of-religion hypothesis can also be used on a lower scale. The greening of a religion is not only visible in what higher clergymen say but also becomes tangible in what happens locally. Specific religious communities incorporate ecological ideas, and these become a local reality. This text wants to continue there by qualitatively looking at the dynamics at a somewhat lower scale.

2.3 The role of the region for sustainable development

I would like to address the idea of the region from a politico-geographical, economic geographical and integrated geographical viewpoint.

In the European Union (EU), there is a growing trend towards regionalization. EU development funds are distributed to regions that apply for them. Development is coordinated by regional administrations and agencies. The region, it is argued, could replace the nation-state and become the next unit of administration right after the EU-level. Right now, the EU is only a union of different nation-states, but these nation-states are not as united as in the United States of America. Nation-states and nationalism could be quite an early and powerful obstacle to more thorough European integration. Kohr (1992:749) is in favor of small state entities. For him, Switzerland is the perfect example. The Swiss people do not derive their identity from

their nationality (German, French, Italian or Romanche) but from being part of their respective canton (such as Uri). These states cover quite small areas and ensure that the people can identify themselves with their surroundings. This could avoid wars that are often fought because of nationalism and its resulting idea of superiority, it also avoids that one majority is effectively assimilating other minorities. This idea also becomes very attractive to the EU as Europe can only be united, European peace only be ensured if nationalism does not play a role anymore. If that was achieved, inhabitants of the European continent would on the one hand see themselves as Europeans and on the other as inhabitants of their region. The nation would not be significant in identity formation which becomes a strong tool for legitimizing European cooperation.

Also, in economic geography, the region receives increased attention as it is considered the most important space in terms of spatial analysis and arena for economic growth. The interest started with an exploration of what came to be known as “industrial districts”. By that is meant “the concentration of small firms in the same industry and the indivisibility of the local industrial system from local society” (Amin 2003:152). They showed a surprising resilience to economic crises and made clear that economic success is not a result of individual entrepreneurial talent (ibid.:151). Instead the embeddedness into a local solidarity system of mutual trust and common culture plays a significant role. The whole society was involved in a common project. Despite the trend in industry to grow bigger, industrial districts were an example of how small entities can still be economically successful. Economies of scale thus do not necessarily guarantee economic success.

Within sustainability studies, “the local” receives much attention. The expression “Think globally, act locally” is just one example of that. Local communities are important for creating global sustainability. Communities are social groups that are based on mutual solidarity, a common sense of place and a common sense of purpose (Kasinitz 1995:11). They were seen as the pre-modern societies. But still today, communities are characterized by much “face-to-face interaction in a common locality among people who have generally had common experiences” (ibid.) also that the “sense of social norms is strong and individual deviation is relatively rare” (ibid.). Society refers to the more anonymous relations between people, its functioning is ensured by formalized rules and institutionalized enforcement. This form of organizing human lives came to dominate thanks to industrialization and urbanization. Even though the German words (*Gemeinschaft*/*Gesellschaft*) for this dichotomy do not refer to a certain spatial dimension, one might cautiously say that in general society is bigger in size than community as well as urban space is bigger than rural space and modern industry bigger than pre-modern manufacturing. Community brings in its connotation the idea that human lives are more than their ability to function in a market system. According to Powell (2009:145), sustainable development should not only mean biological and economic regeneration but also social and cultural regeneration. In the end, it is the societal structures that can ensure a sustainable development. Sustainable communities are the opposite of technological societies. This logically necessitates a scaling-down if true sustainable development is to be achieved. That does not mean that there cannot be a connecting aspect that links all smaller communities together to form a big community. But it means that the smaller scale has to fulfill the task of implementing global ideas such as sustainability. Only a community-led model of development can lead to sustainable development (ibid.:148).

The terms “regional” and “local” also often become central ideas in the sustainability discourse by only being spoken aloud. One of the most important associations is that of transportation and mobility. Products are considered more sustainable if they are local or regional because the environmental impact of their transportation to the customer is comparatively low. In fact, fossil fuels are the main driver of our globalized world as they enable us to transport people and products on a global scale. Not only is our planet harmed by the ever-increasing burning of fossil fuels but also by the infrastructure that is needed to maintain a globalized trade. A regional product is thus not part of the destructive force of globalized trade. It can be argued that the

idea of “regional” and “local” as sustainable terms includes even more. By buying a regional product, one also likes to think of as supporting the regional trade or industry. Apart from the hope that workplaces are kept in the region, the pleasure from buying a regional product, I would argue, is the satisfaction that a region can provide for the well-being of its inhabitants. In other words, it is the satisfaction that the region itself can sustain its human population, no additives are needed from far-away places.

These examples were meant to demonstrate that there is a high importance of the smaller scale when thinking about sustainability as it comes with some inherent and unbeatable strengths. This is important for the assumptions made in this text.

2.4 The structure of the Catholic Church

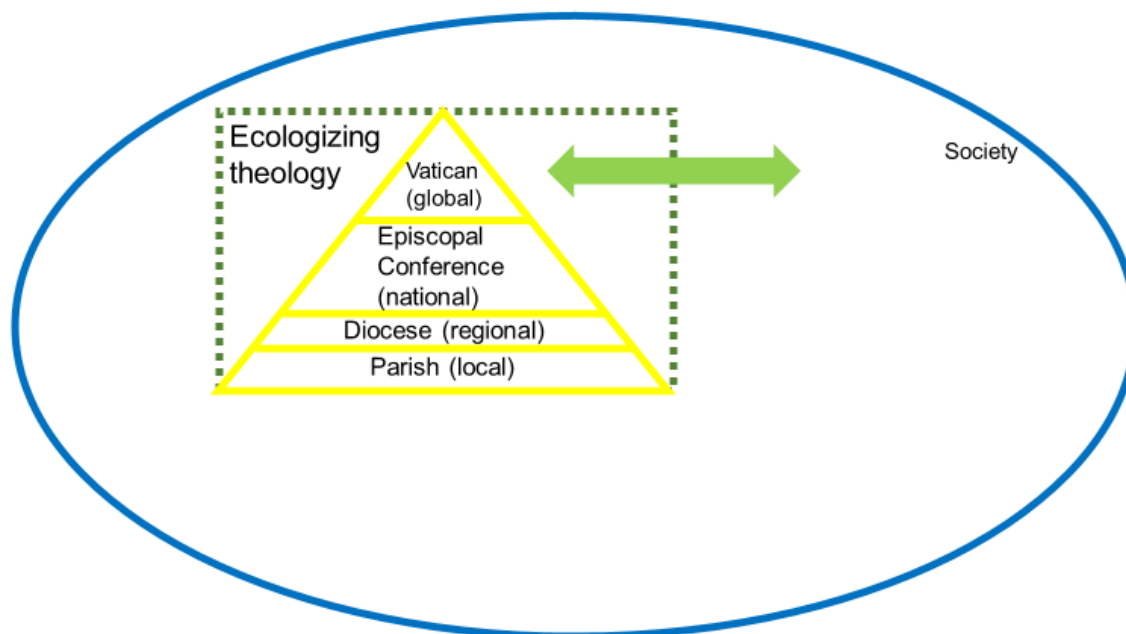


Fig.1: The structure of the Church and its position within society. Own compilation.

As said in the beginning the Catholic Church is both a global and local organization. Fig.1 shows a simplified model of the Church hierarchy. For the argument here, it is only the yellow pyramid that interests us. It is not only the power structure but also the geographical structure that is important. The pope holds the highest office within the Church. What he says is relevant for all other entities. He is the one living person that every Catholic has a relation to. The Vatican as the overarching unit of administration is relevant for all Catholics. The next relevant levels are the countries’ episcopal conferences. These are a cooperation between all Catholic bishops of a country or larger region (such as Scandinavia). While the pope has a general overview of the global situation, the bishops know the national situation much better. The Church in an industrialized country faces an entirely different context than the Church in a developing country. Often the bishops speak the national language which makes communication with the faithful and the rest of society easier than via translations. They often address their respective societies where they react to certain developments within the country. The third relevant level is the diocese which is headed by a bishop. It is the administrative unit of the Church that has a lot of relevance for the individual faithful. The diocese organizes the legal structure of the local parishes. There can be some significant structural differences between neighboring dioceses. The diocese also can make impulses for events to be celebrated together or in each parish. The average Catholic has their most immediate relationship to the local parish. It is there where theology becomes lived reality. The parish can be an important

meeting and gathering place for the entire village. The people of a parish do not only share the same faith but also a similar background as they all live in the same village or part of a city. As the parish offers more events than the Sunday mass, the faithful know each other quite well from different activities.

I would like to propose the argument that the organizational structure of the Catholic Church should be seriously taken into consideration when approaching it from an environmental perspective. With the ideas of regionalization in mind, the Catholic Church already has a geographical structure that can be quite a powerful tool to promote sustainability thinking. The Church is globally connected which means that the basic convictions are the same in every corner of the world. But it also is regionally and locally based. In Catholic countries, the diocese covers a small region and ensures a common organization within it. In Spain there are 70 dioceses. In Germany there are 27. Compared to the number of German states, the most relevant political unit, it is still a lot as there are only 16 states. If the German North and East, where only small Catholic minorities reside, are subtracted, there are 21 dioceses in approximately eight states. The parish represents the local community. The people who are part of a parish fulfill the characteristics mentioned above. The people share the same faith, the same localities, they have to deal with each other personally, rules of conduct are derived from common convictions and in ideal cases there should be a high amount of trust and mutual acceptance within the parish.

2.5 Christian perspectives on nature and society

2.5.1 An introduction to Christian ecotheology

Theology has long focused on the relationship between God and humans; Christian ethics, a branch of theology, on human-human relationships: how human decisions and actions have an effect on human life and interests (French 2000:476). The nonhuman world did not play a big role in Christian thinking. Actions and relations towards ecology were not considered to be of religious significance. Ecotheology is a critique of that and seeks to reposition theology in relation to ecology. In other words, while it is easy for any Christian religion to position itself against the inherently human acts of homicide, genocide and suicide. It is more difficult to approach biocide or geocide religiously (Sullivan 2000:xxvii).

The aim of ecological theology is twofold. On the one hand it is a way to gain ecologic knowledge from Christian traditions in order to be able to react to the environmental crisis of our times. On the other hand, as theology is not static, it is an attempt to renew and rethink established theological perspectives that take the current environmental situation into account (Conradie 2006:3). The two aims of ecotheology are therefore interrelated, one of the aims always also has implications for the other.

Large-scale human-caused environmental problems have not been part in the daily life of Christians for a long time. Early theology, logically, has not positioned itself to that. Nash (1996:6) finds that theology has not been able to respond to basic ecological insights and calls for an ecological reformation of Christianity (ibid.:5). For this to happen it needs an ecologizing theology. I would like to argue that the process of shaping an ecotheology is really much a process. This is why it can be helpful to think of ecotheology as an ecologizing theology.

The Bible does not know about the idea of “environment” (DeWitt 1997:95). But one could say that Christianity’s perspective on creation is partly equivalent to secular society’s perspective on nature. Such a statement is very simplified as the term creation includes what God created which is not only planet earth but everything in the universe. Humans are therefore always included in creation. This is not the case in the discourse of nature that often ends up in a dichotomy of nature that is everything on planet earth except humans; and culture that is humans and their civilizations. One could, like Moltmann (1985:52), say that while the natural sciences have shown how creation can be understood as nature, theology has to show how nature can be understood as creation.

One of the most obvious fields to target for ecotheologists is the creation account. Hiebert (2000:136) differentiates between the two biblical creation accounts. He suggests to also take the social context that led to the production of biblical texts into consideration (ibid.:135). The first creation report that sees humans as priests is actually the younger one. It developed during the Persian time. In the Israelite society, priests belonged to the elite and were the mediators between God and the worshipping people. It was their role in society that was transferred into the text. As the priests were powerful in their society, they ascribed humans a powerful role in creation. The verbs used in Gen 1:26.28 “have dominion” (*radah*) and “subdue” (*kabash*) “clearly designate a potent authority” (Hiebert 2000:137). But to have dominion cannot be equated with violent ruling (Barker 2010:215). The same Hebrew word (*radah*) is used to describe King Solomon’s reign in 1 Kings 5:4. King Solomon was a ruler, nonetheless he is described as wise (v.9), promoting peace with his neighbors (v.4) and safety in his lands (v.5). Also, when man is to have dominion over the animals, Gen 1:29 clearly limits what this dominion includes. The most obvious consequence of having dominion over an animal would be to eat it, yet animals are not even mentioned in God’s list of what humans can eat. If killing is not included in the idea of dominion, the word gets a peaceful connotation. Humans as the priests of creation shall praise the creation and its creator. They are to do that with other living beings that praise God in their own way. One example is the biblical praise of the behemoth in Ijob 40:15-24. Even the less attractive animals are liked by God and praise him in their existence as part of creation, in their way of adapting to their natural environment (DeWitt 2000:293). Humans’ task of praise is complemented by non-human praise. The narrative of humans as priests should be read together with the second narrative that ascribes humans a different role. The second narrative sees humans as farmers. Soil gets a central role (Hiebert 2000:139). Man is created from soil of arable land (Gen 2:7). In the English language this relation can be derived from the similarity of human and humus (Conradie 2005:41). Plants (Gen 2:9) and animals (Gen 2:19) are also created from the very same soil. Living beings all share the same roots. The Hebrew expression for living beings (*nepesh hayya*) is used for both humans and animals (Gen 2:17.19). Having dominion and subduing is replaced by the farmers’ task of serving (*abad*). Firstly, it is humans who are supposed to serve the garden and not the other way around. Secondly, the word *abad* (serve) is also used in contexts that describe the relation of a slave to his master, of peoples towards each other and of the Israelites’ worship of God (Hiebert 2000:140). In this text humans are clearly viewed as servants. Mankind is characterized by two dimensions. One dimension emphasizes the possession of a soul which gives humans a unique but not a higher role within creation. The other dimension emphasizes the inferior part of his existence (ibid.:142) and his dependence upon the rest of creation. From this account it becomes understandable that creation was not created for us but that we were created for creation.

A central idea derived from the creation accounts is stewardship which is strongly related to the notion of humans being created in the image of God. As God is a loving Creator and loves humans, they too are supposed to treat creation with care and love as they are God’s representatives on earth. As humans are only stewards or custodians of creation, they do not own what they manage. God says, “Land will not be sold absolutely, for the land belongs to me, and you are only strangers and guests of mine.” (Lev 25:23). The earth is God’s property and humans should therefore not act as if it was them who can own anything. The destruction of God’s property is the result of our collective sinfulness (Efthimiou 1994:94).

Rayan (1994:130) comments that it is more than only legal and juridical relationships that are emphasized here. God overwhelms the earth with gifts (ibid.). “The earth is God’s beloved daughter” (ibid.:131). The earth is not only the Lord’s, “it is the Lord’s self-manifestation” (ibid.:132). God is constantly revealed in the ever-ongoing process of creation. God is in creation. This is best described by panentheism (Boff 1995:51) which states that God is present in creation and that creation is present in God. There is a significant difference to pantheism that states that everything is God (ibid.).

Boff (1997:151) uses the idea of creation as a book signed by God. It contains God's self-surrender to the creation for the last fifteen billion years, humans can read it. Every species they destroy means burning a library (ibid.:150). The notion of stewardship also implicates that humans are supposed to maintain the fruitfulness of the entire creation (Conradie 2005:211). God repeatedly declares what he created to be good. The first statement of this kind can already be found in the fourth sentence of the Bible: "God saw that light was good" (Gen 1:4, NJB). The good creation manifests the goodness of its creator (DeWitt 1997:96). For example, creation can be seen as a teacher (ibid.:97). If humans destroy creation, they do not only destroy all the good things that they themselves can use of creation, but they also destroy something that God explicitly likes.

The concept of humans as "the crown of creation" is reconsidered by Moltmann (1985) who states that the actual crown of creation is the Sabbath rest. After everything had been created, God takes a rest on the seventh day. For Moltmann, the rest was not necessary because of the six days before, the rest is rather the ultimate aim for which creation has been created (ibid.:279). The Sabbath is the celebration of creation. The Sabbath gives every part of creation its due rest. This is important for regeneration. It can also be an opportunity to stop and think whether the structures that form our life are still acceptable. In Israelite culture every fiftieth year, the jubilee year, was used to restore relationships (Radford Ruether 2000:607). Land was returned to those who lost it, debts were forgiven, captives were freed, and land was kept fallow. All this was done to restore the balance among humans and between nature and humans. From that we can already derive a critique of the mentality of maximization. Today, new religions of growthism or consumerism have been established in society (Barker 2010:64). They lead to a constant restlessness. In ecological theology, contentment receives a high value by itself (DeWitt 2000:308).

Eschatology is about the teaching of the human destiny. Literally it means the "study of the last". "[T]he hope for redemption from sin and evil" (Conradie 2005:17) lies at the heart of Christian eschatology. According to Conradie (ibid.:2), ecotheology needs to address eschatology as he sees it as one of the aspects that have hindered the development of a Christian environmental ethos. The idea is simple: If the focus of Christianity is on afterlife, the here and now can easily be neglected. The task is to address creation and redemption at the same time. One possible direction is offered by Rossing (2000). In an ecological reading of the last part of the Book of Revelation (Rev 17-21) she identifies two contrasting themes. One is the whore of Babylon, the other the new Jerusalem. Babylon is a critique of the environmental practices of the Romans. The Roman trade relations were unequal to the Romans' advantage. Babylon's prostitution is metaphorically directed at the Roman political economy that is based on "exploitive trade and economic domination" (Rossing 2000:209). It is ecological degradation that is the source of Babylon's ruin (ibid.:210). Rev 17:16 (KJV) says, "And the ten horns which thou sawest upon the beast, these shall hate the whore, and shall make her desolate and naked". Rossing (2000:211) comments that the expression of "making naked" cannot only be understood as sexual violence but also as ecological violence, a metaphor that would be supported by the Greek original. When land is deforested, the landscape becomes naked. The practice was common among the Romans who deforested conquered lands. The New Jerusalem is introduced by the notion of no more sea (Rev 21:1). Sea is, for Rossing (2000:213) the representation of these unequal trade relationships. The absence of it in the New Jerusalem is a critique of Rome's exploitative trade. There will be no maritime commerce in God's New Jerusalem (ibid.). The commercial principle of buying and selling is replaced by God giving the water of life freely (Rev 21:6). Rossing comments (2000:216) that "the promise of access to pure, living water for all can offer a prophetic critique of our damage to ecosystems".

Ecotheology also goes back to pre-modern times and looks at how Christians in these times have addressed nature. Chittister (1992:67) mentions Benedictine monasticism that spread in Europe in the early middle ages. Communities were founded that were tied to the land. They

needed to be self-sufficient. In many cases the land around monasteries became more fertile due to the monks' or nuns' use. The monastery became the local industry and center around which a small society developed (ibid.:68). Benedictine monasticism is based on five qualities. The first principle is praise. The splendor of God in nature is appreciated and praised (ibid.:69). The second principle is humility. It is the ability to not have more than one needs for living. It is also about treating everyone as equal part of creation. In monasteries all members follow the same principles, no matter their background (ibid.:70). The third principle is stewardship. It means that a monastery never exists for its own sake. Everything that is done by monastics is for the sake of others (ibid.:71). The fourth principle is manual labor which urges monastics to do things by hand and includes for example repairing, planting and washing (ibid.:72). The fifth principle is community. Benedictine monasticism is based on personal communities in which everyone is equal (ibid.:73).

The Church also formulated the preferential option for the poor (Rowland 2007:9). In the poor one encounters Christ. The very lifestyle of Jesus indicates his alliance with the lowest classes in society. In Latin America, differences between rich and poor are especially tangible. Liberation theology, which primarily developed in that part of the world, wanted to give a voice to the suppressed part of society, not only help but also the means to liberate themselves. The theology demanded societal change. It was soon acknowledged that there is a clear relationship between the problems of the poor and the problems of the planet (Boff 1997:114). In general, poor people face more problems due to environmental degradation than rich people even though they contributed less to the occurrence of such degradation. Nature, on the other hand, faces a similar situation as the poor because it cannot defend itself and needs to accept rich countries' economic interest in it. Boff (ibid.:111) compares the situation of the poor to spaceship Earth. One-fifth of the passengers travel in the passenger-section using 80 percent of the supplies for the journey. The other four-fifths travel in the cargo section feeling hungry and cold. When they become aware of this injustice, they can plan a rebellion. They could cause the entire spaceship to crash. Everyone would be worse off in such a case. They could try to establish a solidarity system with the rich so that everyone can travel comfortably in the spaceship. For planet Earth the similarities are striking. Either we establish a system of solidarity towards nature or it will degrade that much that no human being can survive anymore. In the latter case, everyone would be worse off. The earth can thus be described as the "new poor" that also should be in the center of Christian thinking (MacFague 2000:35) as Jesus was on the side of the oppressed. This becomes especially clear in connection to another central idea in Christianity, namely peace. Peace is Jesus' most important message. It includes peace with oneself, peace with God and peace with others. Ecotheologians would say that it also includes peace with creation but that is implicitly included in peace with oneself, God and others. As Boff has made clear, peace with others is only possible if we establish peace with nature as poverty and environmental degradation are inextricably linked. One could also easily extend the love of neighbor principle to also include environmental consideration (Barker 2010:14). If I pollute the air and others have to breathe in that polluted air, I do not show love of neighbor in my behavior as others are hurt by my actions, even if it is somewhat different than hurting my neighbors physically. By hurting our common ecosystem, I hurt my neighbors as well because they are entitled to the same ecosystem.

2.5.2 Christianity's ability of social criticism

The previous chapter mainly deals with Christianity's ability to contribute with ecological knowledge. In other words, the chapter asked how Christianity can be used to approach ecological questions from a spiritual perspective. A continuous mostly implicit aspect in that short introduction is Christianity's ability to provide a large tool box for social criticism. This would be one additional step. In the environmental debate we can find solutions within our current societal framework without questioning the framework that might cause the problems

that we then need to solve. Hornborg (2019:43) draws an analogy to the monopoly-game lamenting that people tend to direct their frustration at the winner rather than actively questioning the rules that make winning possible and eventually reconsider them. People do not question the idea of general-purpose money and its role in the environmental crisis (ibid.:42). They take it for granted and thus their offered solutions can only be made within a destructive overarching framework. In this section we will briefly look at some central passages of the New Testament about money and material wealth and interpret them as social criticism.

Matthew clearly contrasts God and money; the latter is expressed as mammon in some translations. “No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon.” (Mt 6:24, KJV). By being mentioned as something that can be served like God, mammon is personified and could theoretically also become a God. The passage acknowledges a perverted form of money as a potential competitor to God. This is problematic as money is an inherently human invention and does not have the godly characteristics that we would ascribe to the Almighty. It would be a case of idolatry. The worship of “the work of human hands [...] is the certain way to destroy the bonds of creation” (Barker 2010:54). The drive to make more and more money and to consume as much as possible is also an act of coveting, Adam’s first sin (ibid.:64).

All evangelists report Jesus’ cleansing of the temple. In Mark we can read, “And he taught, and said to them, “Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations’? But you have made it a den of robbers.”” (Mk 11:17, RSV). Lupieri (2014:407) sees the scene as “Jesus’ criticism against a mercantile ideology in religious matters” which endangered the purity of the temple. Once again, the conflict between money or trade with money and adoration becomes apparent. Lupieri is eager to emphasize that Jesus does not criticize “these activities *per se*, since they were both useful, or even essential to the Jewish cultic life” (ibid.:401, italics his). The problem was that the trading occurred on sacred territory. Money’s sphere of influence should be limited by religion as the latter should supervise the former. The traders made money from money trade and abused the faithful’s weak position to enrich themselves. This is why Jesus accuses them to be bandits who should not be active on sacred land.

The synoptic Gospels all report Jesus’ parable of the eye of the needle. “Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” (Mt 19:24, RSV). It is not impossible for rich people to enter the kingdom of God, which is based upon God’s infinite love, but it is at least not easy. A clear skepticism towards material wealth can be detected. This becomes more enlightening in comparison to the following statement: “If any one will not work, let him not eat.” (2 Thess 3:10, RSV). This statement is not undebated, but if we consider Paul’s otherwise quite skeptical relationship towards wealth (such as in 1 Cor 11:22), we could interpret the ones who do not work as the wealthy. Their work today is often based on making more money from much money due to interest rates or on disguising damaging projects as economically wise and desirable. Paul realized that extreme differences in wealth cannot favor a community. Seen from a more global perspective, a societal structure (which is present in our age) that encourages and enforces differences in resource use and wealth (Hornborg 1998:133) cannot only be not sustainable but cannot be ratified from a Christian perspective either.



Fig.2: Quentin Matsys (1514): “The Moneylender and His Wife”, Genaille (1954:104).

In Matsys’ painting that is reproduced in fig.2, economic activity is depicted. The couple’s clothes and other items in the picture such as the orange tell us that they are wealthy (Kuhla-Freitag 2018). The man’s weighing of coins receives most attention in the picture. The woman oversees his activities while she holds the pages of a religious book in her hands (ibid.). The mirror in the lower middle of the picture shows a cross window that appears like a magnificent cross (ibid.). Thru the window in the mirror Kuhla-Freitag (2018) detects the Antwerp Cathedral of Our Lady and a counting house, divided by the cross window. The artist juxtaposes Christianity and commerce. It is acknowledged that commerce can lead to well-being, but it is ultimately religion that ensures ethical considerations to play a role as they would not be produced by commerce itself. It is also religion that effectively can hamper profit-thinking from becoming too distinct and overarching. Taking interest was forbidden by the prophet Ezekiel (Ez 18:13). Jesus formulated the prohibition of interest even more strictly (Geitmann 1989a:4) by preaching “lend without any hope of return” (Lk 6:35, NJB). It is thus not surprising that there was an ecclesial interdiction of taking interest. Up until 1983, interest was formally forbidden by the Catholic Church (Geitmann 1989a:8). A long struggle with “the power of the factual [i.e. industrializing and capitalizing economy]” (ibid.) that had started long before 1983 led to the abandonment of these strict ecclesial rules. Interest is problematic because of at least

three theological reasons. Firstly, interest is a way to exploit those who do not have much rewarding those who are well off already. Secondly, money is ascribed a characteristic that it actually does not have by itself, namely the ability to become more by its mere existence. That can make it an attractive object of interest and adoration. Thirdly, interest proves the proverb “time is money” to be true as it leads to a monetization of time, and “even nights and feasts” (Geitmann 1989b:2). If we recall the idea of the Sabbath rest and Jesus’ critical position toward money, it is highly doubtful that humans should monetize God-given structures such as time which interest effectively does.

Trade is not bad by itself, but when it becomes a tool to mystify an unequal relationship that increases the wealth of some people by heavily decreasing it for many others, it has freed itself from its religious limitations. That is the case today. While religion had been the all-encompassing, literally catholic, meaning-giving structure in people’s lives for many centuries, it is today suppressed by the economy. Religion, very similarly to nature (Daly & Farley 2011:22), has become a subsystem of the economy rather than the other way around. This can be a source of conflict as Christian religion now has to act within this framework that highly limits the Christian message. Christianity is forced to externally accept its new position that it internally cannot accept at all.

2.6 The relationship between theology, Church and reality

Gustafson (referred to in French 2000:477) discerns varieties in moral discourse. There are prophetic, narrative, ethical and policy discourses. French argues that theologians feel more comfortable with the prophetic discourse that emphasizes passion and indictment and with the ethical discourse that emphasizes general value claims and principles. This has probably become clear from the short introduction into ecotheology. All the topics described can be assessed with the question “What does that mean to me as a normal believer?”. What does an ecological interpretation of the last chapters of the Book of Revelation mean to me? What does it mean to me that God is present in creation and that creation is present in God? What does “serving the garden” mean in real life? How can all these ideas developed in ecotheology have an impact on those who do not deal with theology on a daily basis, those who do not even know about the existence of any of these ideas? The most prominent representative of the policy discourse is probably the politician who states exactly what needs to be done in order to achieve certain goals. This is not something that theologians are used to do. The problem, though, is that the environmental crisis is not like any other crisis or phenomenon of human existence. It demands urgent action and new approaches. Ecotheological thoughts risk to remain an academic, abstract and vague debate if they do not become tangible for the public. Our scientific knowledge about the environment obviously does not lead to the action needed (Anderson 1996:12).

One aspect that became apparent during the literature review is that ecotheology does not end at denominational borders. In fact, it is enhanced by ecumenical cooperation. Even though there might be certain aspects that are contributed by certain denominations, it is quite difficult to speak of a “Catholic ecotheology” or of a “Protestant ecotheology”. This should be kept in mind for the following thoughts about the relation of theology and Church.

Christian faith is always a communal faith which means that every faithful is embedded into the community of all those who are convinced by that truth, this community is the Christian Church (Schwöbel 2005:273). Theology as a critical and constructive tool to question credentials and service of the Church is a feature of the Church (ibid.:274). As a thinking faith being rooted in the structures of Christian faith, it is a feature of Christian faith. Theology serves as the identity reassurance of the Church by putting the current community’s life in relation to its foundation and its task (ibid.). This is because the Church is not only a community of creed

but also a community of the interpretation of the gospel. As the Church can only direct its life by teaching, theology has this directive role (ibid.). Theological argumentation can lead to changes in how the Church is led (ibid.:275). Conversely, the Church also has a role for theology as it represents the social life that theology reflects on. Theology can be measured by its social results in the Church. Theology is therefore strongly related to how Christian life practically takes place (ibid.:276). In fig.1, theology is depicted as the background of the Catholic Church. If that background is ecologizing, or developing a branch that explicitly deals with ecology, it can have an impact upon how the Church is structured. In previous research, this has been described and analyzed for the higher levels. Questions such as “How have papal letters addressed ecological questions?” were dealt with. Also, the theory of the greening of religion was developed.

I would like to argue that the lower down the hierarchy one gets the more practical ecotheology will become. But so also the context, difficulties and chances the people face. It is one thing to analyze what the pope says but another to look at how these ideas are implemented in normal ecclesial life. When only hearing about ecotheology, people will have difficulties in imagining what it could mean to their personal life and they will probably always consult the community that proclaims such thoughts. More provocatively, people might wonder, “Now we hear all this talk about ecotheology, but what is the Church actually doing?”. Such questions are not only a sign of the inherent skepticism of society toward the Church but also, as I would like to suggest, a hope that the Church can act as an intermediary between abstract theological thinking and concrete action. There is also a geographical dimension to it. Ecotheology is also abstract because it lacks a local basis. From this perspective, the Church can be a geographical intermediary to bring general (in this case global) thinking close to humans.

2.7 Relevance within human ecology

Weichhart (2016:1090) detects two waves of ecologization of the human and social sciences. The first wave occurred as they tried to incorporate ecological ideas in order to increase their “problem-solving competence”. The second one came with an increasing awareness about environmental problems. Academic fields formulated their viewpoints onto ecological questions. Subfields that explicitly deal with environmental questions developed. These subfields often take “environmental” or “ecological” as a prefix. Each ecological subfield can come with its own insights that other subjects would not be able to offer. Human ecology can be conceptualized as in fig.3 as the interdisciplinary research field that links together these different subjects and their nature-focused subfields. But it is not only the link that characterizes human ecology, because then it would only be a platform for gathering the ecologized subfields of established subjects. It is rather the result that one can draw from linking different viewpoints. This is then the white part in the middle of fig.3, the own part of human ecology. As human ecology is not a well-established subject globally (Weichhart 2016:1093), it is considered helpful to look at the different parts that shape the contour of Lund’s human ecology. These are the yellow fields drawn by solid lines. Theology and its process of ecologization is not a focus of Lund’s human ecology program. When it is dealt with, the perspective is rather anthropological. Nevertheless, ecotheology can also be a fruitful field to use from a human ecological perspective.

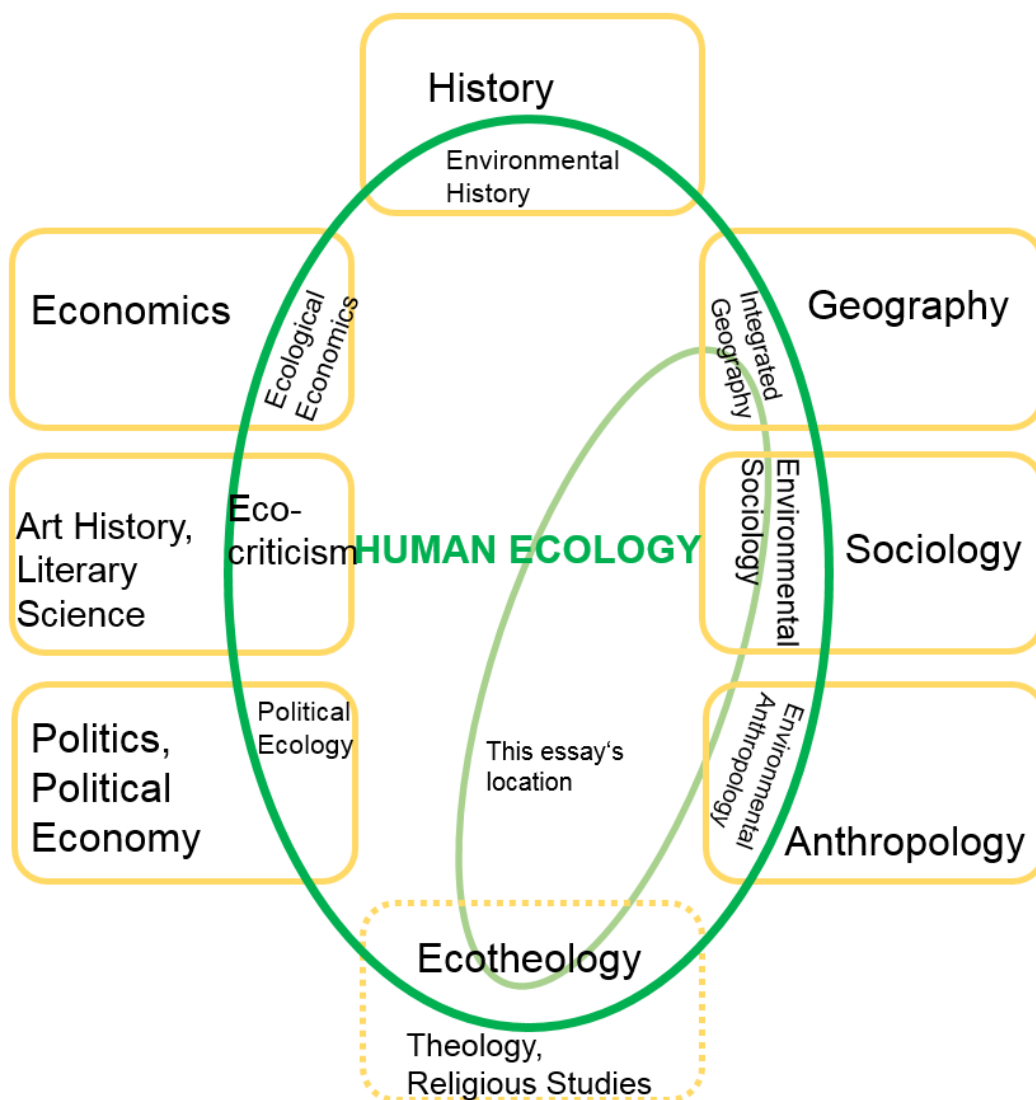


Fig.3: A concept of human ecology as it is being taught in Lund (solid lines) with a relevant addition for this essay (dotted lines). Own compilation.

In fig.3, the different subjects do not seem to be related with each other. This is done intentionally to give the concept a clear structure and avoid complication. Of course the concept becomes very simplified as there is common ground in many of the subjects shown above. But rather than looking at the potential common grounds of the subjects, for our conceptualization the emphasis lies on how different academic subjects have developed an ecological branch and how human ecology draws from methods and resources of all these fields.

This text mainly draws from the four subfields indicated in fig.3, but it is the combination of these that make it human ecological.

3 Methodology

3.1 Presentation of methods

Frascaroli & Fjeldsted (2018:527) state four recommendations for future religion-nature research. Even though their main focus is on dealing with religious impacts on conservation as one of them has an academic background in biology, their four recommendations also guided

this research. They propose a “practice-oriented perspective [...] recover[ing] due emphasis on the embodied and physical aspects of religion.” (ibid.). Firstly, they suggest measuring environmental results and not only attitudes. Even though this recommendation has a clearly quantitative part which this essay cannot conduct, we will still look at what has been done and how ideas and practice are related with each other. Secondly, they suggest bringing new attention to ritual and bodily dimensions of religions (ibid.). As is known from anthropological research, religious rituals and ceremonies can have an effect on the group’s environment. This essay takes that into consideration by partly using anthropological methods and by using concrete examples of rituals. Thirdly, they suggest paying attention to the multi-scale character of religions in both theory and practice (ibid.:528). Religions are not homogenous groups but are organized by an institutionalized hierarchy which can have an effect on how the religion itself approaches nature. By looking at the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, the relationships between and within different scales can be contemplated. Fourthly, they suggest not looking at *whether* religion can contribute to conservation but at *how* it can. As the discussion above has made clear, the discussion has changed over the years from plain critique regarding Christianity to learning from each other and forming alliances. Whether-questions are also quite easy to answer to. The discussion about the White-paper has also shown that simplified arguments can help at the beginning but later on, they are not helpful in dealing with complex issues. How-questions demand more elaborated answers and more thorough understanding. This text will explore the how-part but acknowledges that it cannot be more than a superficial approach.

On a more abstract level, this essay’s research questions deal with how an organization relates to a specific topic and how this relationship becomes concrete in the organization’s actions. The investigation starts from three different geographic levels: the national level that contains the German Episcopal Conference (GEC), the regional level that contains the diocese and the local level that contains the parish. These three levels as well as the research questions have governed the choice of method.

Qualitative methods have been chosen as they try to understand the world from the people’s eyes that are in the focus of the investigation (Bryman 2012:399). This makes sense as it is human beings that attribute value to social phenomena. In this case it is about the relationship between the Church, which by definition means people, and the environment. As the discussion about White’s hypothesis has shown, it is extremely difficult to reach general and simple conclusions when it comes to Christianity’s environmental perspective. Qualitative methods emphasize context (ibid.:401) and understanding more than generalized explaining. They can thus be invaluable tools to analyze certain aspects. In this case it is about geographical and religious contexts as a specific Christian group in a specific region is analyzed. We also start from the premise that the Catholic hierarchical system can represent quite an interactive entity in environmental questions. As qualitative methods emphasize processes (ibid.:402), they can even be helpful to grasp the processes that take place between the different hierarchical levels. The focus on different hierarchical levels has determined what qualitative methods need to be used. On the national/Episcopal conference level, a document analysis is conducted. Environment-related documents that were published by the GEC are analyzed. Documents can be seen as the “windows onto social and organizational realities” (ibid.:554). As the GEC is the coalition of all German bishops and their respective dioceses, this level seems most suitable to find relevant documents. It is the connection between the Vatican and the German society and it is highly likely that all German dioceses will orient themselves by the GEC’s statements as each of them is also represented on this platform. On the regional and local level, interviews are conducted. In order to pay enough attention to the embodied aspects of religion mentioned earlier, a minor field observation is also added.

Two dioceses, the Diocese of Fulda and the Diocese of Speyer were chosen as exemplifying cases (ibid.:70) as they show how environmental work is conducted within their structures. The two dioceses were chosen by convenience sampling (ibid.:201). This means that the researcher

chooses a sample that is most convenient to him. In this case the Diocese of Speyer was convenient in the sense that the researcher himself is part of it. The Diocese of Fulda was convenient in the sense that its environmental officer (EO) was available to the researcher while equivalent persons from other dioceses were not. In both cases the researcher approached the dioceses as an insider as he is a member of the Catholic Church. In Speyer's case, a double-insider approach was possible as the researcher is not only a member but also an inhabitant from the area that the diocese covers. The two cases were also chosen in a way that Trost (2005:117) would describe as strategic. The aim of strategic samples is to cover a large variety of possible answers to the same questions (ibid.). Variables that determine the sampling need to be established (ibid.:118). In this case one variable was the presentation of the environmental office on the internet. 'How sophisticated does it seem?', was a question asked when looking at the internet presence of environmental offices at German dioceses. While the internet presence of Speyer's environmental office is kept simple, the internet presence of Fulda's environmental office seems more sophisticated. Another variable was the EO's background and employment situation. While the person in charge in Speyer is a theologian, his colleague in Fulda is a graduated biologist. This will probably lead to some differences in the answers but also in the respondents' work situation. The two dioceses are not related to each other geographically (they do not share any borders) or canonically (they do not belong to the same ecclesiastical province). Variation could thus also be due to these differences. It is important to emphasize that the reflections on sampling should not be mistaken with sampling considerations taken in quantitative research. In case study research it is more important to understand the case rather than being able to reach generalizable conclusions about the whole population because only then can the case be understood more thoroughly (Yin 2014:59). Case study research does not aim at being representative. The focus should rather be on the possibility to empirically investigate a concept rather than on representativeness (ibid.:40).

A case study is very similar to an intensive analysis, according to Bryman (2012:71). This means that the researcher tries to generate as much information as possible from one single case. Yin (2014:63) adds a recommendation to choose two cases if possible. He sees that as increasing the chances that the case study becomes a good one (ibid.:64). The two cases are to be used in a complementary way.

The interviewees can be divided into two groups. The first group includes two persons, they are the respective person in charge for environmental questions in the Diocese of Fulda and the Diocese of Speyer. This group represents the regional level. The second group includes two Roman Catholic priests, as they mostly work in a single parish, this group represents the local level. The interviews have been conducted in what could be called a semi-unstructured way. It is basically a semi-structured interview with minor changes of its usual form. It was considered more important that the interview should be more like a normal conversation and exploratory. There are certain aspects of semi-structured interviewing that emphasize its interview character rather than its conversation character. For example, the clear beginning and end of the interview make the interview process quite formal. The interviewer tried to establish a friendly relationship with the interviewees from the very beginning and the interview often started before both had the chance to sit down. It takes away some of the interview's obtrusiveness. However, as is usual in semi-structured interviews, an interview guide was prepared for the conversations with EOs (Bryman 2012:471) and most of the questions were asked. But it was not the interview guide that kept the conversation going, it was rather the interviewee and what they wanted to share. The interviews were exploratory in the sense that the interviewer had a chance to get some insight into what the interviewees' functions mean regarding sustainability questions as well as exploring how institutionalized structures work. The tactic described also aimed at avoiding the guinea pig effect (ibid.:281). This reactive effect is concerned with the interviewee's behavior in a testing situation. As an interview is an unusual event in a person's daily routine it can be considered as a test by some, therefore they might act or answer in a way

that they think is expected or appreciated by the researcher, but which is not how they would react in any other normal situation. As the Catholic Church has been criticized in different contexts in the last years not only by the media but also by society at large, considerations about the guinea pig effect gain in importance. Ecclesial employees will probably react to this criticism by extreme caution in how they form their answers. For the same reason, the interviews are not recorded either. This was another measure to improve the relationship between interviewer and interviewee and create an atmosphere that is less characterized by testing and more by mutual interest. Notes were taken to ensure that the interviewees' statements are reproduced correctly.

The interviews with group one and two were both conducted personally and lasted about two hours each.

The observation of the ritual is part of the case study as it happened within the Diocese of Speyer. It was a blessing of animals in which the researcher acted as a participating observer (ibid.:442). Only animals and their owners as well as the priest could be considered as full participants. Everyone else was not as much in the focus but still participating in the singing and praying during this occasion. It was especially important to get an idea of what kind of people attend such a service, how the animals are included and what the priest says. After the service, the author informally talked to the priest and some participants to get an additional impression of participants' feelings and opinions.

By using document analysis, one can get facts and general statements. If the documents are easily available, then the knowledge derived from them is usually also easily available and general. By using semi-structured interviews one can acquire insights, opinions and experiences, that means knowledge that is not easily available, for someone new to the field. By conducting an observation one can get closer to the lived experience. By combining these three methods a more holistic picture can be presented.

3.2 Critical review of the methods chosen

As the interviewees share their own ideas and experiences, there is a risk that their answers do not mirror the exact reality. It could happen that the statements present a certain situation in a better way than it actually is, or statements can be incomplete in the sense that only the positive sides of an issue are talked about while the more negative ones are avoided. In social sciences this problem is approached by triangulation that uses more sources of data or theoretical perspectives in the study of social phenomena (Bryman 2012:392). In this case triangulation is more difficult as there are not many other sources of data to draw from. Thus, it is even more important that a foundation for mutual trust is established. As the interviews also aim at getting subjective opinions, it is also important to keep in mind that subjective opinions are conveyed in a subjective way (Bogren 2008:68). One can consciously decide not to talk about a certain issue so that the researcher does not see the entire reality. It is not possible to get a complete insight after just one interview, but even the incomplete can be of value as it is interesting to analyze what the interviewees choose to talk about and what might not play a role at all.

It is also important to reflect upon the relationship of the researcher to the study object. As mentioned earlier, the researcher will approach the institution as an insider. This is not problematic by itself as long as one is conscious about it. But it will probably lead to a different outcome compared to if an outsider had conducted the research. Both approaches can be meaningful. For interviews the question of how much the interviewer share with the interviewees is unavoidable and can influence the interview situation and the outcome (ibid.:74). In this case the interviewer's and interviewees' common background proved to be a valuable advantage. Chances to get to the real opinions seemed higher for someone who knows about the basic structures, ideas and expressions of the institution. For all interviewees in the Diocese of Speyer, it was even helpful to speak the same dialect which could lower initial barriers and level out other potential power relations.

The group-one-interviewees hold an environment-related office within the Church. Such a position requires at least own faith and probably also own environment-related interests, hobbies or experiences that qualify the person for such a position. These persons have at least two different roles. On the one hand there is their private role as believer and environmentally interested person. On the other hand, there is their job-related function as a representative for ecclesial environmental work. It would be easy to present one's private environment-related convictions as the official stance of the diocese or as the guiding principles of the institution. For this essay it was important to get to know the interviewee's professional role. In order to increase the chances that the person answers from his job position, the interviews were planned to take place at the respective person's office (ibid.:73). This was only possible in one case due to geographical reasons. The other interview took place in a café that the interviewee himself had chosen. Apart from the difficulty of taking notes on a coffee table, this deviation from the plan did not prove to cause any major difficulties or disadvantages.

4 Discussing analysis

4.1 The environmental office

The German Episcopal Conference acknowledges that the Church itself needs to drill and set an example of sustainable living if it wants to remain credible (GEC 1998:186)³. In other words, people will first ask what the Church itself is doing for the environment except of talking about it. They are, however, clear that the Church does not intend to embrace an imprudent acting for environmental protection but to support acting for the future of creation from the spiritual sources of faith (ibid.:281).

Among other things the bishops proposed the establishment of environmental offices in all German dioceses. The bishops appreciate the diocese level as offering "multiple possibilities to give [...] sustainable development its structural anchorage" (ibid.:232). An EO could "enhance responsibility awareness for nature and environment in the light of the Christian understanding of creation" (ibid.:207). To the tasks of an EO the bishops enumerate the preparation of work materials or publications, educating other ecclesial workers, advising parishes, cooperating with state and social institutions and groups and media work to present the initiatives of the Church to the public. Even though the bishops issued their paper in 1998, the EOs worked voluntarily for most of the time. In Fulda a paid position of about 60% exists since 2007, the person in charge holds a PhD in biology. In Speyer, the position is 30% and exists since 2014, the person in charge is a theologian. Legally, the environmental offices are a part of the diocese building department. The superior of an EO is the vicar general.

One of the EOs uses the words "supplicant" and "networker" most often when talking about the job. Especially when talking about his relation to the vicar general and priests, he feels more like a supplicant. The networking aspect seems to be more relevant to describe his relation to other organizations and politicians. These relationships are important as they enable the implementation of ideas. About his relation to the vicar general the EO says:

"I don't have any funds of my own, so I need to go to the vicar general, and I need to argue for it [the project] and fill in an application. It is a lot about persuading." (EO2, interview)

³ If the publication, as in this case, uses paragraph enumeration, then paragraphs are referred to and not pages. This is the more common way of referencing to such publications.

This means that the EO is not even the person that legally decides on what plans are implemented. The model in fig.1 is thus too simplified for the diocese level. It implies that there is only a vertical power and interaction relationship. A pyramidal hierarchy gives the impression that the top decides over the bottom's actions. But there also is a horizontal interaction relationship as the statement makes clear. It is about differing viewpoints or competing interests within the same administration level. This is relevant as some of the EO's ideas are already blocked by his superior, so they never reach the faithful.

“Theologically, he [the vicar general] never says no, but then in effect he does.” (EO2, interview)

The problem is thus not the argumentation but different interests or differing ideas of prioritization. These are not only structurally based in the organization but are ultimately rooted in personal interests and relationships. While it is possible to agree on a theological basis, it is the degree of interest that decides upon prioritization, as the following statement makes clear.

“About *Laudato Si'* [the environment encyclical], the previous vicar general was more like ‘ah, such a paper again, I will just put it into the cupboard’.” (EO2, interview)

Laudato Si' (LS) is the first papal document that explicitly and exclusively deals with environmental questions. It was published in 2015. The letter has been subject to analysis and discussion within different fields. It cannot be dealt with here. In short, the pope addresses all Catholics and people of good will to commit themselves into an ecological reversion as he sees the climate crisis as a very pressing issue. For the Church he sees the need to find a new ecological spirituality. Both the EOs see the document as a recognition of what they do and as an encouragement for the future. But at least in Speyer, the EO felt that outside the Church the letter was much better received than inside. This is problematic because LS could be a very powerful tool in justifying environmental work and high expenditures for it within the Church as the order comes from the highest ecclesial office. But just because the pope writes about ecology does not mean that the entire rest of the Church immediately follows.

“It is like as if the pope poured water onto the Church. How many drops reach the bottom is an entirely different question.” (EO2, interview)

With the pyramidal model of fig.1 in mind, we can easily imagine the spiritual and theological inputs of the higher levels as water that is supposed to trickle-down to the rest of the structure. Between the papal/episcopal and the diocese level the difficulty is to put the ideas into a feasible practice. One could say that theology first goes thru an ecologizing process and then as ecological theology thru an administrative process, in which theological arguments become less important and financial, legal and social aspects gain more importance. Ecotheology becomes “administratized”. In fig.1 the first process happens in the background and in the upper two levels, the second process starts at the transition from episcopal conference to diocese. Fig.1 indicates the decreasing importance of ecotheology for the lower level by the ever-increasing size of the pyramid the further down one looks. The rectangle of the ecologizing theology is more and more superseded by the institutional character of the Church. That does not mean that the lower levels forget about ecotheology. On the contrary, since it is appreciated and accepted by the higher offices it is also accepted by the lower ones. But the lower ones add bureaucracy to theology. So, it is the organizational structures that enable or disable certain developments. This text draws a picture of ecotheology being a thriving and big field. We need, however, to remind ourselves that it is just *a* field within theology and by far not the one that theologians have most experience with. In fact, the EO with a theological background complained that

ecological spirituality is not a topic of the theological education program. This problem is also mentioned by ecotheologists stating that “the natural world was largely ignored as a subject in their [Christian scholars’] religious formation and education” (Johnson 2000:4). Ecological topics thus always compete with other topics that are seen as more directly associated with theology. Adding to that, there are at least two other constrictive factors. As the theoretical perspective upon today’s ecotheology has shown, it is a reaction to the ecological crisis. Even if it seems self-evident, it is important to emphasize that today’s ecotheology exists because of the ecological crisis. Therefore, I would like to argue that ecotheology also requires knowledge of the ecological crisis. It is only by understanding what the crisis is about, that we can understand what ecotheology can be. Theologians would therefore need a clear understanding of today’s crisis to see ecotheology in a larger perspective. However, according to the EO, theologians lack ecological knowledge.

“A couple of days ago, we [pastoral workers of the diocese] listened to a presentation about climate change [...]. Afterwards some of my [lay pastor] colleagues said that they had heard about these topics for the first time. Then I just wonder ‘How can it be, that they hear about that for the first time?’” (EO2, interview)

For human ecologists, it is sometimes difficult to understand that not everyone is interested in or engaged with environmental questions. The education of theologians, however, is theological, and maybe not as interdisciplinary as other subjects strive to be. Their later employment only rarely has a concrete relation to nature. As long as theologians do not grasp the ecological crisis more thoroughly, and this is also true for the vicar general, they will not be able to see the full potential of an ecological theology.

The second constrictive factor on an organizational level is the organization’s structural diversity. By that is meant that the organization has to deal with many different topics. Some receive more attention than others. One EO complains that there often is no time for environmental topics even though they are most urgent.

“I had a briefing with the bishop to tell him about [the latest progress of] the environmental work in the diocese because he would meet ministers [...] But this topic entirely toppled over backwards because of the sexual abuse [scandal] and the restructuration of parishes.” (EO2, interview)

The ecological crisis happens in the background and is therefore not as concrete as other phenomena. Even though one might agree that immediate action is necessary, for an organization that does not have much experience or a long tradition of proactive environmental engagement, this topic will be dealt with as long as there are capacities. The capacities allocated to environmental work are easily taken over by more immediate, but not necessarily more urgent, matters. This constrictive factor also includes a financial dimension. The Episcopal Conference states that, especially regarding sustainable development, not always is the cheapest option also the most cost-effective one from a long-term perspective, clearly refusing a short-term policy of savings (GEC 1998:234). One EO talks about the financial limitations.

“In Speyer, we are going on low flame [German expression for financial austerity]. [...] Usually I can persuade the diocese administration when it is about cost savings.” (EO2, interview)

The diocese with its administration also follows basic organizational principles. Projects that lead to cost savings are always easier to approve for people who were not part of the development of the project but only see it as something to approve or not. In concrete terms, an

ecothological idea is seen from a cost-benefit perspective while going thru the administration process. The climate crisis is an abstract idea that only becomes concrete in some situations, such as extreme weather phenomena. Adding to that measures for climate protection are often either more expensive than conventional solutions or have fewer tangible results as the question of how to approach an abstract idea with specific action remains. Certain projects do favor an economic saving more than others. Investing in renewable energy or renovation projects for example could thus be easier to get thru the administration process than the initiation of more spiritual impulses in the parishes. The former can indeed lead to savings in the long run, while the latter means expenditures.

The EO also has the task of working together with the parishes in environmental questions. One considers it quite difficult to reach the people. In his engagement with parish administrations he laments that environmental discussions often do not move beyond more basic questions.

“Then it is discussed whether to buy the cheap coffee or the organic one. And I just think ‘these are questions that we should have dealt with long ago.’” (EO2, interview)

In order to promote ecological spirituality, it probably also needs a basic ecological awareness. On the other hand, ecological spirituality could be the instigator for more ecological awareness. Both are related with each other. If one remains at a low level, the other cannot move beyond a certain level.

A prevalent local theme is the yearly parish celebration which usually is an outside gathering of the entire parish. While the priests immediately think of this celebration as an occasion to demonstrate one’s ecological awareness by not using plastic dishes. The EO, on the other hand, thinks that caring for creation is more than that.

“They [the people organizing the parish celebration] say ‘Let’s use reusable plates at the celebration so that our EO will be happy’. This makes me so angry [lit. from German idiom: I get such a throat].” (EO2, interview)

The parish celebration was referred to by all interviewees. It is the event when all the parish comes together and celebrates in a less spiritual way. These events embody the spirit of community but right now it seems that when they are connected to ecological thinking, their potential is reduced to small actions such as the change of plate material. This was also the main thought of a priest when reflecting over these celebrations. Many of his sentences even remained in the conjunctive and the ideas did not go beyond waste separation and waste prevention.

When it comes to the relationship to the local parishes one EO stated the relationship in the following way.

“When I talk to the local communities about sustainability, the reaction is usually something like ‘We are doing that anyways’. Especially in the rural communities, the people still butcher their own animals or cook with many own ingredients.” (EO1, interview)

The statement reveals that the idea of what sustainability from a theological perspective means is not yet tangible for the normal people. The EO cannot easily reach the people as this statement also makes clear. With the risk of interpreting too much, this difficulty maybe also stems from the EO’s and the rural people’s different backgrounds. The EO could be seen as an academic from the bishop’s office who does not have a close relationship to the local people and their environment. Taken together with the previous statement, the EO is maybe also seen as

someone coming and checking right behavior or enforcing the smaller changes that everyone associates with environmental awareness. This leads to the risk that all responsibility is transferred to the EO. When a priest only talks about actions in the conjunctive, it could very well be that he knows that there are others who have more authority or resources to implement certain ideas which consequently also results in a certain slowness at the lower level.

A very obvious way of reaching the faithful would be to include environmental topics in the homily. Interestingly, this was not mentioned by the priests at all, neither was it mentioned by the EO who could prepare suitable material. One reason for that is the attendance statistics. In the Diocese of Speyer, 7.7% of registered Catholics participate in the weekly Sunday mass (GEC 2017:1). An eco-homily in an average Sunday mass would thus only reach a small proportion of the entire community. However, even reaching the people would not be enough as the EO emphasizes.

“Faith does not go thru the heart into the hands. [...] In our Church, there are some people who are active for AFD [Germany’s right-wing party] and said things like ‘Adolf wasn’t that bad after all’ and still they read prayers for refugees in the mass. These are the contradictions that exist.” (EO2, interview)

Only hearing about things obviously is not enough, even if the message comes from the Church. The homily is not the best occasion to proclaim ecotheological ideas because of the difficulty to live according to these ideals, to always act being guided by one’s faith. One priest even thinks that the message of the Church is not taken seriously anymore because the Church itself has difficulties to exist in modern capitalism.

“How should a profit-oriented system take the Church seriously? (*break*) How should the economy take Jesus seriously?” (priest 1, interview)

Fig.1 reveals that the Church is an interdependent part of society. That also means that the market plays a role. As the quoted priest demonstrates, there is a clear contradiction between the message of Jesus and our current market system. The market system provides the more powerful and thus the more accepted ideas. The Church will always lag behind and can only act within the societal frame. But it can look for partners in the society that share the same goals. This is done by networking, which is a prevalent theme in different regards. By telling a story, one EO emphasized how important networking has become for the Church.

“We invited the environmental spokesperson of the Rosa Luxemburg foundation [linked to the German left-wing party “Die Linke”]. Of course, we wondered can you do that? With the bishop? [...] He [the spokesperson] said himself he reads *Laudato Si’* as a gay communist. [...] But you realize that you are allies.” (EO2, interview)

In this way the Church’s role of being a participant in the societal debate becomes apparent. It is not only by interaction with itself and its members the Church can take action in environmental questions, it is also by interaction with the rest of society, as the Church has the clear mission to care about everyone not only its own people (GEC 1998:259). This interaction is visualized by the green arrow in fig.1. There are many other organizations, groups or persons that want to take action for the environment but struggle against the capitalist market system.

4.2 Buildings, energy and mobility

The German Bishops declare that “Christian belief in creation obliges the Church to face the energy problem as lawyer of creation” (GEC 2011:53). They admit that the Church needs to

bear witness to a sustainable dealing with energy by concrete action in ecclesial institutions and in the way of life of Christians (ibid.:48). As the Church is a large owner of real estate, the episcopal conference enumerates ecological construction (GEC 1998:223), usage of renewable energy sources (ibid.:224), measures of energy saving (ibid.:225) and measures for biodiversity protection (ibid.:226) as possible fields for lived ecological awareness on one's own grounds.

The Diocese of Fulda has created directives that protect birds living in ecclesial buildings as a way of literally enhancing biodiversity in and around the church. Especially steeples and roof trusses are important habitats for bats, jackdaws and kestrels (van Saan-Klein & Schweizer 2013:5). Renovation projects for example need to be conducted with consideration to the birds.

Energy was the central theme that one EO talked about when being asked about ecclesial environmental work. In Fulda, the diocese conducted energy checks of 1200 of its buildings and made a contract with the local energy provider to receive green electricity from a local water power plant. In one church geothermal energy is used and two other churches use wood pellets. An enthusiastic spirit was encountered when it comes to energy questions which is best captured by the following:

“In my opinion, the Church should lead the way and also try out innovative things. If it is not us [the Church], then who?” (EO1, interview)

Also, one priest sees energy-related questions as a very central issue as the following statement illustrates.

“For me, belief in creation also means questioning whether the church really needs to be heated up to 18 degrees. [...] But then the others say ‘oh, but the organ’ [...] once I said, ‘that’s nonsense, the organ does not have any problem with some degrees less.’” (priest 2, interview)

Energy seems to be quite an easy-to-relate issue as people from both levels spend much time on talking about energy and how the Church can deal with it. Energy plays a role in their life and in the social discourse on climate change much focus is put on energy sources. Saving energy seems for all to be a very obvious, simple and right thing to do. Also, the usage of renewable energy sources was met with enthusiasm. The priests argued for solar panels on church roofs when they enumerated churches that were perfectly suited for them. However, in this issue they face an “administratized ecotheology” that renders their wish impossible. Even though the Episcopal Conference as early as 1998 stated that “the large roof areas of ecclesial buildings offer good possibilities [for photovoltaics]” (GEC 1998:224), the Diocese of Speyer does not allow it for aesthetical reasons. The local will to use solar energy is so strong that one priest did not follow the rules and put solar panels onto his church during a “cloak-and-dagger operation” (EO2, interview). Without judging the advantages or disadvantages of solar energy, we can see that, in this case, it is not the lower level that rules out an idea from the higher level. It is rather the intermediate, administrative, level that does not allow for theology to become practice.

The diocese also developed a tool which enables an exact analysis of the energy and water consumption of a building throughout the year. By doing so, one could see temporal differences and effectively target the anomalies. The tool however requires that someone provides data which is difficult in two ways. Firstly, people feel that the diocese wants to control them. This experience portrays the diocese as an overseeing body rather than a connecting entity. It seems that the diocese is perceived as the people from the far-away bishop's see who sometimes come

and try out their ideas or tell the people what to do. The similarity to the relationship of German states and federal politics in Berlin is a suitable comparison in this case. Another difficulty is one EO's qualification as a biologist. When she participates in technical discussion, technicians experience that as intrusion into their territory. Secondly, it needs someone who provides all the data which is quite time-consuming. The difficulty already reveals a common theme. For the diocese to work, it needs people, usually volunteers, in the parishes to cooperate with, which proves to be rather difficult.

Speyer also developed an energy management tool which could decrease the environmental impact of energy usage and lead to monetary savings. However, this needs the cooperation of the parishes, especially the interest of the priest. But they are said to drown in administrative work already.

“And now imagine me coming [during a presentation at a conference with priests] with my ‘administrative tool’. The priests will just put on their blinders immediately. [...] Do you know how many priests approached me afterwards [to receive more information]? Not a single one. (*break*) That was disillusioning.” (EO2, interview)

During the interviews with the priests it became apparent that one major burden to more environmental action was their tight schedule being filled with journeys to different churches and administrative work. One priest wished to get more efficient driving itineraries as he felt having to drive to and forth different places is unnecessary. This wish does not only show the willingness to use less petrol but also the packed schedules that literally do not leave any space for thinking about more sustainable solutions. Also, the normal churchgoer does not want to spend much time in a voluntary project.

Since the interest in the parish is missing the diocese even chooses to go a different path.

“We are also trying to develop an automated version [of the administrative tool], then one wouldn't need the people anymore.” (EO2, interview)

By doing so, one could overcome the difficulty of finding interested people and avoiding putting an additional burden onto their shoulders. But community would not be favored by such a development. Even technological solutions could have the potential to create an ecotheological community and foster an ecological spirituality. If they come automated from the very beginning it is difficult to build a community on that. The action itself is quite concrete, ecotheology leads to the increased interest to save energy in ecclesial buildings but if saving energy becomes automated, it is only concrete for its own sake and not for the people or the community. It becomes a cost-saving measure and something that can be presented to the rest of society, but it would be sterilized from its actual theological foundation.

The need for cooperators on the local level reveals the relative power of the lower levels. Theologians, the pope and the episcopal conference can only give spiritual guidelines and urge people to do something. The practical part is done further down the hierarchy. When, as in this case, certain ideas cannot be implemented because nobody in the parish wants to cooperate, then it is ultimately the lowest level that is the most powerful as it can hinder the ideas from higher levels. It is not a conflict of different theological arguments, it rather is a conflict between theology, bureaucracy and practice. While the theology is entirely accepted at the lower levels, the bureaucracy or administrative situation can effectively hinder it. But in this case, the administrative framework would be available, it is the practical part that consequently has to follow the administrative one. The relationship is thus not simply a top-down one but also a bottom-up. Contrary to the expectation, in this case it seems that the top-down relationship is the ecologically enhancing one, while the bottom-up relationship is the constrictive factor.

Another important area emphasized by the EO was mobility. The Diocese of Fulda starts to make its car pool electric only. When we were walking around the facilities and cathedral, the new infrastructure needed for electric cars was one of the topics the EO chose to talk about. Since charge stations for electric cars are directly visible, electric mobility issues seem tangible and concrete and offer clear results to present. The following statement summarizes the situation.

“We had a discussion about this charge station at the office. [...] How many of the usual lots can we transform to electric charging lots? [...] But then there are other questions that arise. [...] Who is allowed to park here and for how long?” (EO1, interview walk, standing in front of a charge station near the cathedral).

The enthusiastic adoption of electric mobility is best reproduced by the following statement.

“I would also put a sticker on the back of the vehicle. Along the lines of ‘Do good and show it to the rest.’” (EO1, interview)

Here, driving an electric car is equaled with doing good. Even though one technology is just exchanged with another, the change from petrol to electricity in mobility is seen as a good thing, an example that should be followed by the rest. The other side of how many resources the production of electric cars dissipates is not commented on. Again, a high confidence in technological solutions is revealed.

The EO’s experiences about the mobility of the faithful are less enthusiastic.

“I usually tell the people that ‘churchgoing’ [German: Kirchgang] contains the word ‘walk’ [German: gehen]. A village of 1.5 km in extension does not necessitate the usage of cars. [...] But it is usually the young and busy who come to church by car. [...] Now, with more and more parishes being combined, masses are no longer in one’s own village all the time. But even then, carpooling would be an option which is not taken into consideration.” (EO1, interview)

It seems difficult to reduce the usage of cars by ecclesial workers.

“Due to the rural structure of the diocese, it is difficult to get everywhere by train. We do have a contract with the German Railway that offers discounts for journeys but often, the car is needed to get from one place to another. [...] These journeys, however, are compensated by Klima-Kollekte [a carbon dioxide compensation fund of Christian Churches in Germany] which provides the highest standard that is currently available.” (EO1, interview).

Later on, the EO admits that she also likes flying but compensates her journeys as far as possible. Christians are highly embedded into society. They cannot be seen as separated from it. This means that a Christian does not only do things as Christian but as all the other attributes that characterize him. Christians form a part of society and make thus use of what it has to offer. Put in more pessimistic terms, “[e]ven Christians who cease to be anthropocentric [...] often remain committed to the technology that drives the progressive deterioration of the natural world.” (Cobb 2000:497). Without commenting on Cobb’s statement on anthropocentrism, the latter part of the sentence and the description of measures implemented invite to think about the environmental action that is taken. I would like to make two points.

Firstly, as mentioned before, the Church is a part of society and can only act within its limits. By itself, the Church cannot come up with entirely new solutions on how to respond to climate

change. Increased ecological thinking in theology has also led to an interest in modern heating systems, renewable energy sources and electric mobility. It is encouraging to see the Church actively trying to face the ecological crisis, but it is not revolutionizing. The Church alone cannot lead to the changes needed and deliver perfect answers, but it is very well aware of that (GEC 2006:61). However, it can use its position in society to urge politics, economy and society to the changes needed (ibid.:62b). Whether that will be successful is highly dependent on whether the Church is taken seriously. Today's society associates green technology with climate protection. Someone is considered environmentally friendly if he uses electric cars or solar panels or other forms of modern and smart technology. There are, however, arguments that seriously question the eco-friendliness of green technology such as solar panels asking, "to *whom* it will be accessible, and at the expense of *whose* resources and labor" (Hornborg 2014:91, italics his). Someone who demands greater changes and who does not enthusiastically look at green technology as the solution is considered a misfit and not taken seriously anymore as society sees its basic foundation under threat. In public life one can only talk about environmental protection within a certain paradigm. That paradigm favors technology. Technological progress is a self-evident concept almost independent of "ideological persuasion" (ibid.:76). This also became apparent during the interview as one EO expected the interviewer to know about "modern environmentally friendly ways of heating". It seems that just because someone comes from a somewhat environmental background, he is expected to know about state-of-the-art green technology. Climate compensation is another case in point. It enables the continuation of current habits without really questioning these habits. For the Church, embracing green technology seems the most effective, and probably the only feasible way to also fulfill the task of influencing society in broader terms.

Secondly, this optimism in green technology could be considered as light green environmentalism. Mizzoni (2014) analyzes statements issued by Church leaders to come up with a characterization of the Catholic environmental ethic. He classifies it as "light green, weak anthropocentric stewardship ethic" (Mizzoni 2014:418). One could say that the observations made when it comes to energy and mobility also point to light green environmentalist activities. Interestingly, Mizzoni seems to equate light green with weak anthropocentrism. Cobb (2000) who was previously cited even thinks that Christians can cease to be anthropocentric. The discussion about anthropocentrism will be continued later on after having looked at more aspects of ecclesial environmental work.

4.3 Creation time

As one EO clarifies,

"Responsibility for creation also means [...] celebrating [it]." (EO1, interview)

Creation was not part of the ecclesiastical year, which means that there has not been a day that is explicitly dedicated to creation. The GEC proposed the introduction of an "environmental Sunday or an environmental week" (GEC 1998:195). But it was ultimately Pope Francis who declared September 1 as the World Day of Prayer for Creation. The creation time starts then and lasts about one month. The Diocese of Fulda for example is included in the organization of the "Ecumenical Day of Creation in Hesse". This year's slogan was "you can subsist on my fruits" focusing on the protection of biodiversity.

"The Ecumenical Day of Creation is first of all a celebration of thanks for God's wonderful creation, a praise, but it is also a making aware that we [...] cannot live without creation, that it is our basis of existence. [...] This is what we want to celebrate but also admonish that we deal gently with creation." (EO1, interview).

First of all, the day is ecumenical which is important to emphasize because it is in itself quite an ecologic idea. When the different denominations think about what characterizes their own faith, they lack a holistic view. A part of the ecological crisis is also due to our lack of seeing the whole thing. This starts with the specialization in work life where a worker is in charge of a small part only. It is more profitable to employ an expert for each step than all-rounders who know about all steps but not as much about a single one of the steps as an expert. Moltmann (1985:17) calls that the “rule of experts”. The idea of how a specific step is related to the rest is easily lost, even more the ability to see bigger processes that occur in society as a whole. In academia, a similar process is visible. Subjects aim at differentiation and establish clear boundaries of what belongs to a subject and what does not. This enables each subject to answer very specific and narrow questions, but at the same time it limits them in taking more viewpoints into consideration. Moltmann says that “we know more and more about less and less” (ibid.). In ecology, we cannot look at one specific part without taking other parts or the entirety into consideration. The ecological crisis can thus not be dealt with by one subject alone. Even in theology and religious discourse, emphasis is still put on what defines the own faith. By doing so one risks to not see the wholeness of Christianity anymore. Proclaiming the Kingdom of God will not work with a denominational focus only. Christian faith needs to be the basis to start from. Cooperation of different Christian groups is thus a deeply ecological idea as it moves away from specialization and its resulting loss of the holistic picture. Ecumenical cooperation is facilitated by the high degree of theological accordance.

“In fact, theologically, there is no dissent [on ecological questions] between Catholics and Protestants” (EO2, interview)

The second part of the Day of Creation is its celebrating character. During an open-air mass, a creation tree is planted. The third part, the admonishing character, is apparent in the cooperation with different actors that inform about sustainability issues. To name some, the Nature and Biodiversity Conservation Union, one of the largest German environmental protection groups, informed about its regional work and focus areas. Children could build nesting boxes. Also, one could calculate one’s own ecological footprint.

The Diocese of Speyer organizes “Trendsetter Weltretter” (trend-setter by saving the world) during creation time. According to the EO there, people are more receptive for ecological questions during creation time. The project has a different topic each year (the topic of 2018 was “Consume differently”) and focuses on individual action. Participants receive a weekly assignment and daily stimuli by e-mail or Whatsapp. A weekly assignment during this year’s project was, for example, not to buy any plastic for one week. A stimulus in that week informed about “plogging” (a Swedish trend of combining jogging and trash-picking) as a way to actively improve the well-being of one’s surroundings.

4.4 Car fasting

Lent is the 40-day period starting on Ash Wednesday as a preparation for the Easter holiday. It derives from the pursuit to follow the spirit of Jesus Christ and gain strength in his power (GEC 1985a:334). Jesus wants our repentance, but we can only follow him when we become aware of our own sins and limitedness. Repentance and penance are directly linked with each other (ibid.:364). One way of doing penance is fasting which has a long tradition in the Church (GEC 1985b:90). Fasting means renouncing, love of neighbor and humility. It is compulsory to participate in the easterly lent period for every Catholic aged between 18 and 60 (ibid.:266). It is a way of preparation for the forgiveness of sins at the Easter celebration. It also symbolizes the faithful’s attachment to a suffering God and to suffering people here on earth. Fasting establishes a reorganized relationship to oneself, God and one’s neighbor. Someone fasting has to renounce from certain things that he likes but that are either not necessary or harmful or both.

It is an exercise to find contemplation, to get to know oneself in a better way as one has to deal more with oneself and one's habits being more undisturbed by distractions from outside. By fasting, we can also find a new approach to God, it deepens our relationship to God as distractions disappear. We show that we are ultimately dependent on him. From renouncing certain things, we might be able to establish better relationships with our neighbors. But since love of neighbor is an essential part of fasting, better relationships should come naturally. Lent is an occasion to drastically rethink our current life and reduce our standard of life. Therefore, lent also has an ecological aspect. If we reduce the standard and speed of our lives, nature benefits as the use of resources is reduced. Lent asks us to think about what we really need. The rules for fasting were much stricter in the past. Today, the most common associations people have with the lent period is renouncing certain kinds of food. Even though the lent period could be much more than that, the most popular answer of what to do during lent would probably be avoiding sweets, alcohol or tobacco.



Fig.4: An advertisement for the 2018 car fasting. Taken from: autofasten.de.

The Diocese of Speyer used to participate in the organization of the “car fasting”-project. It builds upon a cooperation of both Catholic dioceses, Protestant regional Churches and the regional public transportation company. People are encouraged not to use their car during lent. The regional transport provider offers participants reduced monthly passes. As can be seen from fig.4, public transit plays a big role being symbolized by the train and the bus in the footprint. But also walking and cycling. The footprint probably symbolizes the aim to decrease one's ecological footprint or to make it greener. In a country that is heavily dominated by the automobile industry, questioning mobility habits seems to be quite a large step. There is also a significant difference between for example renouncing sweets and renouncing car-driving during lent. We might do the former with the hope of gaining some advantage such as losing weight. The necessary is combined with the advantageous. Our neighbors do not benefit from

our renouncement of sweets. Renouncing car-driving, on the other hand, will probably not be of advantage to us at first. We will probably need more time to travel around and the comfort will be decreased. It not sure either whether using public transit is cheaper (even if there is a discount during the lent period). The benefit of not driving a car will be societal by cleaner air and a more silent environment. This alternative will benefit nature and by that also all people. The prophet Isaiah says, “Is not this the sort of fast that pleases me: to break unjust fetters, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break all yokes?” (Is 58:6, NJB). The prophet sees fasting as a way to destroy unjust fetters, to make changes for the better. Today, the comfort of our mobility has created unjust fetters. We become more and more dependent on cars even though we know that they are harmful to the planet’s well-being. At the same time the automobile industry gains more and more political and financial power. “Car fasting” can be a way to rethink this relationship and even establish more just ones.

One priest first started talking about “Car fasting” when it was mentioned by the interviewer. His reaction, however, was very passionate and excited. With joy he talked about the experiences he and members of the community had thanks to this project. It seemed that this project has reached the parish level and was well-received.

The interviews with the EOs show a different dimension. Even though the Diocese of Fulda is represented in fig.4 in the bottom right-hand corner, it is conducted on a very small scale according to the EO there. The project is very dependent on the cooperation with the regional transportation company and is not well-received as the diocese mostly covers rural areas. In Speyer, the EO diplomatically said “the administration decided to set other priorities” (EO2, interview). There was some regret in his voice. In Speyer, the withdrawal from “Car fasting” was compensated by their own project “Trendsetter Weltretter”.

4.5 Blessing of animals

The author also visited a service for the blessing of animals. It took place in the parish of Schifferstadt (Diocese of Speyer) on November 18, 2018 and was arranged in cooperation with the local horse club.

Issuing the blessing can best be described as a ritual. God blesses humans after having created them (Gen 1:28). Jesus blessed children (Mt 19:13ff). The ritual will award a person divine living force, protection and the grace of God. Blessing animals in Germany is a tradition that dates to medieval peasant societies. The working animals and livestock were blessed to ensure their service. Today, working animals or livestock have been replaced by pets. The blessing as a traditional ritual still exists. Therefore, the animals that participated at the service were about twenty dogs and twenty horses and no cows or pigs as would have been the case some centuries ago. The service took place on a paddock. The owners and their animals all faced the priest in a half circle. Other participants were standing outside the paddock behind a fence. Aspects that create the classical church atmosphere such as songs and organ playing were aggravated. Singing did not reach its effect as few voices were distributed over a large open-air area. Three hunters played the bugle. After a reading and prayer, the priest issued the blessing to the animals by dashing holy water on them and their owners. Psalm 148 was a central element and was spoken by the priest and the faithful in turns. A part of it is quoted here.

“Praise him [the LORD], sun and moon, praise him, all you shining stars! Praise him, you highest heavens, and you waters above the heavens! [...] Praise the LORD from the earth, you sea monsters and all deeps, fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind fulfilling his command! Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars! Beasts and all

cattle, creeping things and flying birds! Kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all rulers of the earth! Young men and maidens together, old men and children! Let them praise the name of the LORD, for his name alone is exalted; his glory is above earth and heaven.” (Ps 148:3-4.7-12, RSV)

Once again, we can see the idea that everything that forms part of our planet praises God in its own way as it reveals God’s spirit and, as Ps 148:8 says, fulfills his command. From this perspective, animals are not different from humans as God’s spirit is revealed in both and as both have the ability to praise God in their own way. The difference is that humans are created in the image of God while animals are not. This does, however, not degrade animals as already the location of priest, faithful and animals has shown during the mass. Animals that are not expected to fulfill any practical work for humans receive the blessing and are treated as equal participants during the service. Later on, after the service, the priest said that he was impressed that the animals were that quiet. To him, it was as if they had known that this was for them. The animals and their owners were in the focus. Events such as these also acknowledge the fact that many people established deep relationships with animals. During the service the priest emphasized that understanding the language of animals helps us to understand the language of creation. He thinks that we are in an ever-increasing need to really understand creation. More critical viewpoints would state that the ritual of the blessing of animals started in a clearly anthropocentric manner as humans wanted their animals to provide for as much as possible. Even if this was true, the fact that it still exists today is enlightening for our understanding of ecotheology in practice. Two developments need to be considered. Firstly, as stated before, not many people own livestock today. Animals are kept for company and pleasure. Households are no longer dependent on animals in an economic sense, but in an emotional sense. Secondly, within theology we can detect an ecologizing process. The priest’s message of understanding animals as a way to understand creation is very likely a result of the new focus on creation. With that in mind we cannot criticize the maybe more utilitarian hope of medieval blessings of animals but have to see them in their own context. On the contrary, we should see the blessing of animals as an example of how traditional ideas can be used to gain new knowledge today. The tradition was definitely not harmful in the past and now it can be used to recover an old knowledge and use the old spirituality to face current problems. Such a service then clearly has the potential to create and enhance the ecological spirituality of the faithful. However, in this case, it only attracted people with some relation to the horse club. According to the priest it is always them who ask for the priest to come. So there seems to be an outspoken wish by the faithful to maintain this ritual. Apart from the mentioned fact that church services do not attract many people anymore, this service attracted even less and only those who probably already have some idea of what ecological spirituality can mean.

4.6 Christianity and anthropocentrism

A lot of discussions about theology and nature focus on the question of whether Christianity is anthropocentric or not. As stated previously, some researchers think that Christians can cease to be anthropocentric, others have a hard time denying Christianity’s anthropocentrism and call it differently such as “weak anthropocentrism” and still others call for more biocentric religions as they are highly skeptical of Christianity’s anthropocentrism. These approaches are rooted in a dualistic perspective of how to classify religions. Anthropocentrism is seen as bad and biocentrism (or even ecocentrism) is seen as good. Social questions, or more precisely, answers to social issues are rarely either right and good or wrong and bad. This is why people even more try to cling to apparently clear right/wrong-thinking whenever possible. Anthropocentrism and

Christianity was such a case in point. Since White, anthropocentrism has become an idea nobody wanted to be associated with as it was commonly seen as bad. Pope Francis (2018:115) bemoans that modern anthropocentrism has prioritized technical reason over reality. He elucidates that a misguided anthropocentrism should not be replaced by other concepts such as biocentrism (ibid.:118) as this would exchange one inadequacy with another. If humans are conceptualized without any difference to all other beings, their responsibility awareness would decrease (ibid.). As Pope Francis states, “Human beings cannot be expected to feel responsibility for the world unless, at the same time, their unique capacities of knowledge, will, freedom and responsibility are recognized and valued” (ibid.). Christian anthropocentrism is always also Christocentric. In Jesus Christ, humans can truly be humans. Jesus Christ is the justification of everything Christians do. Blessing of animals, for example, would not exist if people did not believe in God’s unconditional love for every living being. It is humans who are created in God’s image and thus have a special role in creation, but their role is a caring one. God assigned humans to tilt the garden. Christian anthropocentrism is in essence theocentric. Hamilton (2017:39) argues for a new anthropocentrism. Humans have become such a strong power on the earth that they in some regards act a natural force. The name of the new geological period “Anthropocene” takes that into consideration. It is only humans that can destroy the planet in an extensive way. Humans have, by the burning of fossil fuels, changed the major geological processes in a way that would not have happened without humans. If humans are an active geological force on earth, Hamilton (ibid.:43) resonates, it is not less anthropocentrism that we need but more. Humans are different from all other creatures as only they can have responsibility (ibid.:53). In Hamilton’s new anthropocentrism humans need to take care of the resources the planet offers precisely because they have power over it (ibid.:54). If human beings disappeared, the earth would cease to exist, as it is only human beings that by their intellect can conceive the earth as such “rescuing it from cosmic insignificance” (ibid.:116). Without humans there would not be a species to consciously conceive the planet and everything it offers. Hamilton’s ideas are quite similar to Christian convictions.

I would propose an “honest anthropocentrism” that takes into consideration the critique that has been directed to the concept of “Anthropocene”. Malm & Hornborg (2011:64) argue that it is not humans as such that are the new geological force. Humans participate highly unequally in being a new natural force. In fact, the actual force, fossil-fuel technology, requires global inequality. “Anthropocene” comes with the connotation that it is all humans that are the geological force. If we transfer this idea to the debate of “anthropocentrism” it would literally mean that *all* human beings are in the center. “Honest” is meant to emphasize the “all” that comes with *Anthropos* and to instigate thinking about what humans really need. If we are honest with ourselves and think of what we really need for a good life that at the same time could be done by every human being on this planet now and in the future, the planet would not be harmed. Humans’ interests are ultimately dependent on nature’s interests. What was denoted “anthropocentrism” has never really been anthropocentric but rather capitalocentric. Christian perspectives can guide us to find spiritual foundations for an honest anthropocentrism.

5 Concluding remarks

We will start by first looking briefly at the sub-questions and then conceptualize the answer to the main research question.

How does ecotheology take shape in ecclesial environmental work? In this case study, ecclesial environmental work contains two components. One is technological, the other spiritual. Both derive their justification from theology. But only the latter cannot do without it. The technological component shows a high confidence into and enthusiasm of eco-technological solutions. Apart from the high understanding for the necessity of rethinking energy questions,

“confidence” and “enthusiasm” mostly represent what Christians call “hope”. A hope that not everything is lost or in vain, a hope that something can be done practically and that a good will is the foundation to start from. There are two points to be made here. Firstly, we have discussed the necessity the Church faces to engage in eco-technology as a way of conducting the most feasible changes. Changing cars from conventional to electric finds more support in a large organization than more drastic changes. It also enables the Church to remain an appreciated partner in the societal debate about climate change in which technological fixes are more preferred than, again, more drastic changes. Secondly, technology as it became apparent in ecclesial environmental work is not a Church-specific subject. Christian tradition has lived without any major technologies as the introduction to monastery life has shown. The Church finds itself being dependent on “solutions” from other sectors of society. That means that technological progress in today’s meaning will not be made in the Church but can find its application and theological justification there.

The second component of ecclesial environmental work is a Church-specific one. Spiritual activities can only take place in this context. We have shown how traditions such as lent are combined with ecological thinking that as a result creates something that no other social actor would be able to create. Christian thinking that in a large part of society is seen as outdated or old-fashioned offers a rich repertoire to draw from in order to handle current large-scale problems such as the ecological crisis. That this is not really taken so much into consideration everywhere is more due the general disinterest than Christianity’s inability. Another component that was detected in the analysis is the forging of alliances. The Church alone does not have the power to lead to the changes needed. But, as became apparent in a statement by a priest, it struggles within the social capitalistic framework that exists. As Jesus, the Church wants to engage with all people no matter their background and it found that others struggle as well. Many spiritual activities are done in cooperation with other organizations or participants. Among them, the case study shows natural conservation groups, regional public transportation providers, a left-party foundation and a horse club. As in the case of public transportation, the regional provider would prefer less focus on cars and more on public transportation. It is commonly known that there would be environmental benefits, yet cars receive most attention. With its creation perspective the Church can offer a new way of looking at cars and mobility. Both might not agree on everything else, they definitely use a different language for uttering their ideas. But when it comes to environmental questions, they both share a same goal.

How does practiced ecotheology relate to anthropocentrism? Christian ecotheology in practice is, if anything, anthropocentric. Christians do not turn to a new animism or entirely change basic convictions but rediscover what is already present. Christian anthropocentrism seems more promising and substantially different than the worldly version as it takes into consideration that God became human in Jesus Christ. Christian anthropocentrism thus always also has a Christocentric perspective. All ecotheological activities acknowledge humans as the ones who have the ability to consciously act and improve something, but that the ultimate aim is serving God. The activities would simply not make sense if only conducted for the sake of humans. Ecotheology finds its justification in God and its potential in human beings. The human-caused environmental crisis can only be solved by humans. It is humans who need to reconsider their place and behavior on this planet. Ecotheology, by its emphasis on Christ and God, can guide the new anthropocentrism that needs to be developed, as its teachings reveal highly ecologic and relevant thinking. It has the capacity to balance out the apparently inherent risk of anthropocentrism to become a tool of a small powerful group.

How does the structure of the Roman Catholic Church and its position within society enable and limit aspirations of making ecotheology more practical? As we have seen, the relationship between abstract ecotheology and practical regional or local action is more complex and

depends on more participants than the EO of the diocese. There are both vertical and horizontal relations and the societal framework that need to be taken into consideration. Before ecotheology becomes practical, it also needs to go thru an administration process as fig.5 summarizes zooming in the triangle of fig.1.

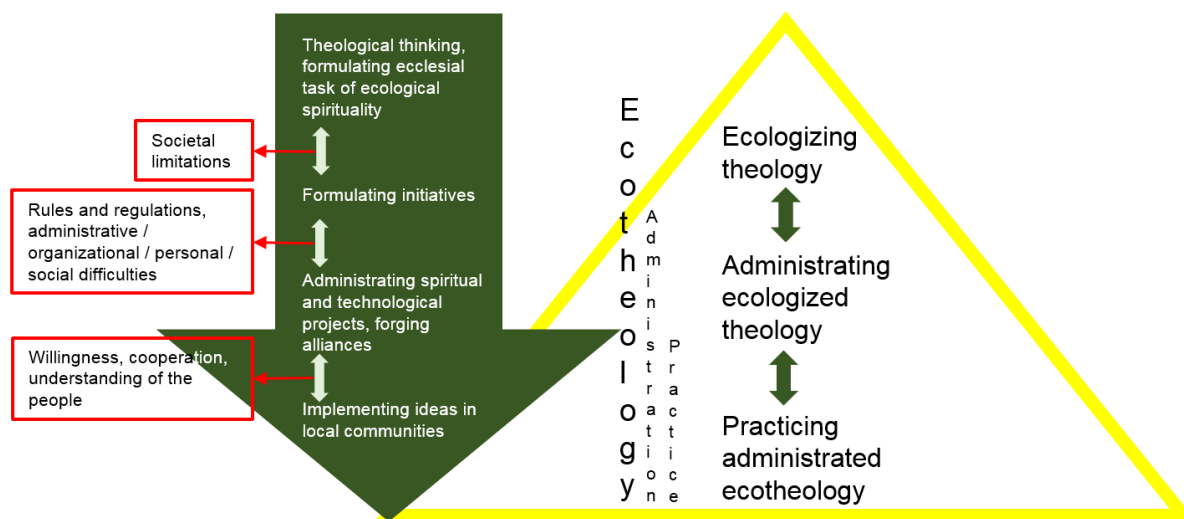


Fig.5: The relationship between ecotheology and practical ecclesial environmental work. Own compilation.

The higher levels formulate own or accept academic ecotheological thoughts, ecotheology is not even restricted to the Church itself, thus the word also some letters outside the triangle in fig.5. The lower levels have to administrate the ideas and put them into a feasible practice. The higher levels provide the theological encouragement, but they do not have to think so much about concrete regional or local projects. Administration has the advantage of knowing what is best possible in one's region and being able to keep up face-to-face interaction. It appears that the top-down relations brought a dynamic of ecological awareness also to the lower levels. The red arrows indicate some possible obstacles for ecotheology to trickle down. The environmental office is only one part of that chain but probably the most visible. It belongs to "administrating ecologized theology" in fig.5. In theory, it is the link between the other two. Most activities start with theological ideas, then find a bureaucratic framework and lastly a feasible practice. Others, as the example of the will to install solar panels has shown, would have a practical and theological foundation, but it is administration that hinders action. Environmental offices are a needed link, but they find themselves woven into an organizational structure that mostly decreases their highly needed activities. With "societal limitations" fig.5 refers to the conflict of societal technocratic and capitalistic growth thinking that to a large degree dictates what the Church can do and what it cannot. The rather enthusiastic adoption of green technology is one such example. The Church has to act within this paradigm even if it often is a restricting factor to ecotheology itself. It is placed higher up the arrow as it is a rather early limiting aspect. The pope can more generally criticize certain social developments, but a local community needs to find feasible solutions that the social paradigms allow for.

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6.1.2 Online sources

Autofasten.de, accessed 11/28/2018, picture available at
<<https://www.autofasten.de/fileadmin/document/Autofasten-2018-Plakat-in-A3.pdf>>

6.2 Unpublished material

6.2.1 Interviews

EO1, environmental officer in the Diocese of Fulda, date of interview: 11/14/2018
EO2, environmental officer in the Diocese of Speyer, date of interview: 11/20/2018
Priest 1, priest in the Diocese of Speyer, date of interview: 11/18/2018
Priest 2, priest in the Diocese of Speyer, date of interview: 11/18/2018

Appendix: interview guide for EO interview

The interview guide has been translated from German.

Insights into the environmental office

What kind of tasks are part of your position as EO (probably categorization of inside Church and outside Church possible)?

How are projects conducted (from idea to reality)?

What convictions and role models inspire the work?

How has the work within the diocese changed over the years?

What are your experiences in your contact with local people / priests / colleagues / etc. regarding sustainability questions? What is their feedback?

How does cooperation with other actors work?

General opinions and experiences

How can the Church be an important partner in the climate debate?

What does sustainability /environment / etc. mean to the Church?