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A religious perspective on climate change

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1. Intro

The link between religion and climate change was spectacularly introduced in the Danish debate when a Danish Lutheran Church bishop declared that he saw a link between climate change and the Day of Judgement. Climate change could be a sign of the impending End of the World. Melting glaciers and floods out of control are vivid images of disintegration and disaster. According to the New Testament, the Day of Judgement will be preceded by heavy storms and floods. The bishop was immediately rebuked by a number of theologians who pointed out that the climate change which we see today is, at least partially, triggered by human activity, while the Day of Judgement is an act of God. Moreover, you cannot simply translate the Biblical world picture to our context. In the New Testament, the Day of Judgement and the signs of it are mythological descriptions which require demythologisation to become relevant to our lives today. The bishop replied to such criticism by saying that of course neither he nor anybody else knows the day and time, but that he was simply using climate change to draw attention to the significance of the Day of Judgement to the Christian faith. We cannot prove that climate change is a sign that the Day of Judgement is near, but on the other hand, we cannot disprove it, just in the same way that many other natural disasters may also be signs.

In the USA, conservative Christian movements have been advocating the same message – that climate change is a sign that the Day of Judgment is imminent. The significance of such an ecological disaster is that one must spread the Christian message even faster than before as time is scarce. However, this view is by no means shared by all Christian movements, nor by all conservative circles. Of course, what is most worrying about this view is that it encourages us to take no action to mitigate climate change, which is what we should be doing if climate change is indeed anthropogenic. Some people refer to the fact that according to the Bible, the Earth is only on loan from God, which means that Man is obliged to look after it as
God’s creation and treat it responsibly. And they refer to the commandment of charity “You shall love your neighbour as yourself”, which is found in the Bible in various versions. If we take no action in the face of the climate problem, we increase the harm done to our global neighbours. The world’s poor will suffer as they do not have the means to ward off the consequences. At the same time, they are the least to blame for the problem. It is the rich nations, such as the USA and Western Europe, which have a special moral obligation to act.

This discussion shows that the religious perspective on climate change is by no means straightforward. There are lots of religious perspectives on climate change, just as there are many faiths and many different views within the various faiths. This article will focus on the question of whether there is a religious perspective which could contribute to combating climate change, and what form such a contribution may take. What the article offers is thus only one of many possible perspectives. This perspective is inspired by the European Christian tradition, but is fundamentally inter-religious and not specifically Christian.

It is interesting to note that the UN has addressed the ethical dimensions of climate change and has published a ‘White Paper on the Ethical Dimensions of Climate Change’. And perhaps even more interestingly the UN has also launched an initiative involving the faiths in the fight against climate change. Excepting the collaboration which has always existed between UNICEF and the faiths, this is the first time that this is happening on a larger scale. The UN Development Programme (UNDP) and the Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC), which is a secular institution helping the big world religions to develop their own environmental programmes based on their creeds, core doctrines and practices, will be heading the initiative, which will be presenting a seven-year plan of action at the beginning of 2009. The programme involves major traditions within eleven of the big world religions: Baha’ism, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Judaism, Shinto, Sikhism and Taoism. It would appear that the global community is realising that working together on political, economic and technological problems is not enough; more fundamental problems such as a common human ethical set of values must be addressed if more sustainable solutions are to be devised.

In explaining its reasons for collaborating with the religious faiths, the UN cites a number of both practical and more theoretical reasons. One of the practical reasons is that the faiths are major land owners. They own more than 7 per cent of the habitable land surface of the planet. The faiths together make up one of the largest investing groups in the world. They
are major providers of education and health care worldwide. They have vast media networks. The great faiths have astonishing outreach. However, even more interesting are the theoretical, philosophical reasons why the UNDP attaches importance to collaborating with the faiths. Under the heading: ‘Myth, metaphor and memory’, it is stated in item 5:

The emphasis on consumption, economics and policy usually fails to engage people at any deep level because it does not address the narrative, the mythological, the metaphorical or the existence of memories of past disasters and the ways out. The faiths are the holders of these areas and without them, policies will have very few real roots. People need to understand why certain archetypes, myths and stories work and others do not. The “climate change activist” world and indeed the environmental world has all too often sought refuge in random use of apocalyptical imagery without seeking to harness the power of narrative. Without narrative, few people are ever moved to change or adapt. The faiths have been masters of this for centuries.

(ARC, 2007)

So according to this statement, the faiths are – by virtue of their stories, myths, metaphors and images – able to engage people at a far deeper level than politics and economics. Under another heading, ‘Celebration’, it is stated:

Climate change and environment issues are often presented as scary, or at least doom-ridden and gloomy. Yet human psychology does not work well when only told how bad we are. The need to celebrate in order to appreciate better why we need to care for our planet, is something the faiths understand well and can help the often over-earnest secular groups to appreciate. Understanding the cyclical nature of festivals and lives also assists in helping build a profound environmental awareness into yearly rituals. We can want to protect the world because it is beautiful, not simply because it is useful – and with that as our value, we might perhaps protect it better.

(ARC, 2007)

So, the secular environmental activists usually only manage to appeal to our bad conscience, threatening the End of the World if we do not act. The faiths, with their ritual celebrations of the beauty and generosity of Creation, on the other hand, are able to contribute a much more positive reason for looking after our planet. Reference is generally made to the fact that the faiths often advocate simple and sustainable living and
thousand-year-old values which go hand in hand with environmentally friendly and pro-ethical lifestyles.

2. Ethics and religion

There is hardly any doubt that if the religions are to play a positive and productive role in the fight against anthropogenic climate change, the UNDP is on the right track. Incidentally, in this article it is assumed that the UN is right in saying that climate change is man-made even though the technical discussion of this has not been concluded. In continuation of the points made by the UNDP, this article is trying to suggest specific contributions which the faiths may, on more philosophical grounds, be able to make to the fight against global warming. Again, this is only one suggestion; there are undoubtedly many others.

It is, of course, also a problem talking about the faiths as if they were all the same. The faiths are undeniably very different. However, the aim of this article is to try to answer the question of what religion could contribute to the fight against the fateful climate change. Here, a number of religious metaphors are brought to life which are common to many, perhaps even all faiths. Because even though the faiths are different, they also contain a number of common elements. It makes sense to talk about universal religious beliefs. The idea is not to smooth out the differences between the faiths, but to point out something commonly religious which relates to something universally human. It is noteworthy that religious groupings which for centuries have disagreed on central faith-related questions are now agreeing on the climate issue and sending out joint declarations. For example, the Pope and the Patriarch of Constantinople are currently speaking out in considerable agreement on the climate issue despite the fact that the Roman-Catholic Church and the Greek-Orthodox Church have for more than 800 years brought about division and disagreement within the Christian faith. There are many other perspectives and aspects to the faiths than the ones mentioned here, but they are not of immediate relevance to this article.

Generally speaking, the contribution which the faiths can make is about the motivation to do something about climate change. The faiths cannot contribute technical, economic or specifically political solutions. But the question of motivation is also important as there is general agreement that the only thing we need to do something about climate change is the will to do it. We do not need more technical inventions, and we do not need to wait for more innovation. We have all the tools we need, what we need now is the will.
The specific contribution from the faiths could follow from the ethical implications of anthropogenic climate change. If climate change is man-made, then we are ethically responsible. If our emissions of greenhouse gases, and especially CO₂, constitute the main factor behind the current global warming, we also have the power to decide how much warming should be tolerated, and thereby we are the ones who decide which human communities and animal species should live and which should perish. It is also our responsibility to divide the right to emit CO₂ into our shared atmosphere. Should we maintain the blatantly unjust distribution of rights which we see today, where the rich industrialised countries emit relatively more CO₂ per capita than the poor countries, which – and this is well-documented – suffer most of the damage from global warming? Richness is accumulated in the rich countries while the damage and the risk grow in the poor countries and in the vulnerable natural world. The ethical dimensions of climate change are addressed elsewhere and will not be repeated here. The question which one should ask oneself in this context is: What is the relationship between ethics and religion? What is the relationship between moral norms and obligations and the faiths’ talk of divinity and holiness?

It is clear that religion involves ethics. The faiths include considerations and discussions about the basis of ethics in the form of practical ethical
instruction. Some of the most fundamental ethical principles stem from
the faiths. For example, the golden rule ‘Do unto others as you would have
them do unto you’ and the commandment of charity ‘You shall love your
neighbour as yourself’ are found in several faiths. The following five com-
mandments are found in all the big world religions: 1) You shall not kill. 2)
You shall not lie. 3) You shall not steal. 4) You shall not act immorally. 5) You
shall honour parents and love children. The faiths also share a number of
other ethical norms, so they can to a great extent contribute to the dis-
cussion of the ethical dimension of climate change. The religious perspective
and the ethical perspective overlap. Often contributions from the faiths are
perceived as ethical contributions. Religious leaders from all the big faiths,
from the Patriarch of Constantinople to the Dalai Lama and the Pope, have
already impressed upon us our responsibility for the planet in the face of
global warming.

The religious leaders first and foremost appeal to our ethical sense of
responsibility, and so in this respect their rhetoric does not differ much
from that of secular political leaders. The faiths are seen as a moral resource
which can contribute to stressing our responsibilities and to ethical and
moral rearmament. They can both awaken our ethical consciousness and
identify specific moral obligations. They can, with some weight, for example
based on the commandment of charity, which is common to all faiths, claim
that it is our duty to look after the planet and its diversity of life because
the planet has now become our neighbour as our power over the natural
world is now such that the fate of the planet is in our hands. Figuratively
speaking, the planet has a temperature and is suffering, and it is in our
power to cure this illness. This function is, of course, extremely important,
but here we want to focus on the fact that religion is about much more than
ethics. What specifically can the religious perspective contribute over and
above the ethical? It is actually important that what the faiths contribute is
not reduced to a proclamation about our ethical responsibilities as we will soon get enough of such moral admonishings.

Religion can do something which ethics cannot. Ethics can point out what is our duty. From a particular ethical perspective it is, for example, our duty to act responsibly in the face of climate change because it is our duty not to harm other people or the natural world, but to look after them in so far as it is in our power to do so. However, ethics has difficulties presenting the reasons why we must do our duty. Why should we be good and think of others and not be selfish and think only of ourselves? Some people would say that we must act ethically because that is most expedient. However, on the face of it, it is not most expedient for the rich countries to show consideration for the poor. The rich countries can amass even greater riches by exploiting the poor which must bear the brunt of all the consequences of climate change. One could say then that it is most expedient for us all if the rich countries show consideration for the poor, but this simply raises the question once again: Why should we act in a manner which is most expedient for us all? If something is ethical because it is expedient, is one not in the end saying that it is ethical because it is for one’s own benefit? That is, is it ethical because it is selfish, and is that not self-contradictory? Is what is truly ethical about an ethical deed not the fact that one does not act out of self-interest, but out of consideration for another human being?

In brief, based on a particular understanding of ethics, it is a very big question whether ethics can be explained rationally. Our ethical deliberations seem to assume that we must be good rather than explaining why this is so. That we must be good seems, in an unfounded way, to be part and parcel of our existence in the same way that other people, animals and birds and trees and flowers are part of our existence. The question is whether the Polish-English sociologist Zygmunt Bauman is not right when claiming that it is a mystery how we can be plagued by the thought that we do not care about others even though we list to ourselves plenty of grounds why we quite rightly do not need to care about others. Ethics is a pre-rational fact, which is something other than an irrational fact.

This is where religious reflection can go further than ethics and provide a pre-rational explanation. Some religions answer that love is the reason. The reason why we must love each other is that God loves us. The world has been created so that it is full of love, and therefore we must love each other. The created love in which we live and which embraces us is the basis of ethics.

It is generally important to point out that there are other reasons for doing what is good than the duty suggested by ethics. As the Danish
theologian K.E. Løgstrup pointed out, love does what is good without being bound by duty to do so. There is a spontaneous goodness within us which has many faces. When parents look after their children, they do so not out of duty, but freely and easily. When good friends help each other, they do not do so out of duty, but willingly. And it must be added that in love you often do much more than one could ever be expected to out of duty. Parents can sacrifice everything for their children, and friends can be unreasonably generous to each other. According to religious reflection, the good deed is the deed done out of love. If a deed is done out of duty, then it is not done out of consideration for another person, but out of duty, which is not optimal from an ethical point of view as ethics demands that we act out of consideration for the other person. Only in love do we act exclusively out of consideration for the other person. The deed done out of duty is in reality a replacement deed for the deed done freely and out of love.

If we all lived in love for one another, like children and parents, lovers and friends, then there would be no need for the duty of ethics because then we would all be looking after each other freely and happily and fulfilling the ethical requirement of being good without being bound by duty to be so. The problem is that we often do not fulfil the ethical requirements, and then duty must be brought into play as a replacement for love. Duty must make up for the lack of love. Duty is inferior to love, but better than indifference. As a society, we have to institutionalise duty to maintain an acceptable level of ethics. The health service and the tax system are examples of the institutionalisation of duty. The institutions make us help those who are ill and weak, even though we might not care about them. Duty is necessary to contain selfishness and curb cynicism.

Ethics is restricted to pointing out our responsibilities and duties. That is, it can only motivate us to act through moral coercion and moral threats. Its point of departure is that we are lacking in will to do what is good; ethics must force out the good in us. This is, of course, also necessary, but this is where ethics is restricted. As a perspective, it is blind to the fact that, potentially and actually, we also contain an unforced will to do what is good in the form of potential and actual love. In the religious perspective, Man’s lack of will to do what is good is interpreted as sin. The lack of will to do what is good arises because Man does not realise that the world is created by love and for love. Man believes that the world is simply a means to fulfilling his own needs. According to the religious interpretation, ethics are necessary because of sin, i.e. from this angle the ethical view of human nature is that humans are sinners. The religious view of human nature is much wider.
Man is not only a sinner, he is first and foremost created in God’s image, and that means created by and for love.

Religion is thereby not limited to using moral coercion and moral threats when motivating us to do what is good. It can also appeal to our love resources. Human beings are not simply selfish beings, but also beings who are or can be ruled by a need to care. This is not an idyllic description or a description of how it should be. This is a description of how life actually unfolds. I think most people will recognise a description of humans as beings who can also be seized by a will to do what is good. Religion can help nurture this side of our potential as humans, which ethics cannot. Religion nurtures it through its view of human nature and the world. Religion sees humans as being created in God’s image and the world and its creatures as having been created to be loved and looked after. This fundamental vision in itself contributes to coaxing out our love potential because our fundamental views of something deeply influence our attitudes. What determines our actions is to a much larger extent our fundamental vision of ourselves and the world than our subjective choices which are controlled by the vision. If we fundamentally see the natural world as being made up of accidental, impersonal material which exists basically as a means to fulfilling our needs, then we will treat the natural world as such. We must be careful how we interpret the world, because that is how it will become, given all the power which we as human beings possess today.

The faiths consolidate their visions in people by means of myths and rituals and metaphors, images and dogmas and confessions. For example, religious services to a very large extent consist in songs of praise. We sing the praises of God and thereby also the praises of all creatures created by God. The songs of praise and the eulogy emphasise that the universe and the natural world and its creatures are valuable in themselves. Not only do they have the value which we assign to them; they are valuable in themselves because they have value by virtue of God. Many faiths never tire of praising what is, from the biggest to the smallest, from the smallest blade of grass to the elements themselves, everything is magnificent and worthy of praise in itself, regardless of its utility value.

The faiths are incredibly insistent in their songs of praise. In the psalms and rituals, the variations of the praise seem endless. The Great Spirit loves variety, as it is said in Indian religions. The natural world is multitudinous, filled with individual variation. There is not just one species of boll weevils, there is the leaf weevil, the apple blossom weevil, the pine weevil, the figwort weevil etc. For the faiths, the diversity of life is proof that the power of being’s relationship with what is is love, because love is always love of the
individual, of letting the other unfold in its individual variation, of living and letting live.

The religious interpretation can thus contribute a deeper and more far-reaching motivation to fighting climate change than ethics because it can motivate via elated, positive feelings such as love, respect, affection and experiences of beauty. Motivation and commitment based on positive, elated feelings are far more effective than involvement based on negative feelings. The motivation of parents to look after their children is infinitely deeper than their motivation to pay tax. We are happy to forgo and make sacrifices for our children, but we become embittered and self-righteous if the tax authorities make us pay too much. We pay our taxes out of duty.

The more we love the earth, the more deeply we appreciate its wonders and glories, the readier we will be to sacrifice for it. One cares for what one loves ... One does not need majestic mountains to gain this appreciation – a mundane occurrence such as learning that there are over eight hundred species of tarantulas will evoke awe in most of us!

(McFague, 2008: 116)

Religion can – at best – inspire love of the planet and its inhabitants as a reason for fighting harmful climate change. Love is a far deeper motivating force than duty because it focuses on the giving, while duty is focused on deprivation and sacrifice. Psychologically, it is much easier to make people do something if you focus on the giving and not on the deprivation. If duty stands alone, it not only becomes a laborious toil, we simply drown in it. It drains our mental reserves. In the long run, we are enervated by duty and become loveless and burnt-out. There is something scary about people who are governed purely by a strong sense of duty. Duty must be supplemented with love or the other way around, otherwise it overwhelms us. If we only encounter ethical threats, then we choke on them and perhaps finally give up completely in the face of the unbearable demands of duty.

The problem with ethics is also that they give rise to feelings of guilt, but that they cannot deal with this guilt. When people in the rich world are faced with their obligations in relation to the poor world and the future of the planet, they will not be able to fulfil these obligations, and they must invariably feel guilty. No ethical person can live in the rich world without feeling guilty, but ethics have nothing to offer when it comes to dealing with such guilt. They can only instil it and make it grow. The consistent accumulation of feelings of guilt is psychologically very unhealthy. We can end up breaking down under such pressure. One way of surviving is to reject the
whole ethical project as hysterical. We give up on ethics and become cold and cynical. It won’t help anyway! Here too, ethics can be supplemented with religion because the religious vision offers metaphors for forgiveness, atonement and restoration of the suffering of the victims. Religion offers a possibility for upholding the entire – perhaps insurmountable – ethical project without being destroyed by it.

Ethics do not fundamentally change people. Love does, and it comes with deep, unremitting and generous commitment. In so far as cosmic love is the central theme for the faiths, they can commit people more deeply and more unremittingly to caring for the planet than ethics can. The faiths offer a supplement to ethics, whereby they provide the potential for reflection on the two huge problems thrown up by ethics, i.e. the explanation problem and the guilt problem. Ethics is placed in a larger framework, where it is seen as love’s servant. Duty cannot do without love as its basis, but it should also be added that love cannot do without duty. Some faiths take a double view of humans, containing both aspects, as they do not simply see humans as being created in God’s image, but also as sinners. The faiths can contribute a religious vision which embraces and supports ethics. The faiths generally put us into a much greater context, both temporally and cosmically, than the political debate, which often does not see beyond the next election. They offer a hope of restoration which makes it possible to bear disappointments and setbacks without giving up.

In this account of the relationship between ethics and religion, it is important to stress that religion is not a necessary prerequisite for ethics. It is not an indisputably deduced conclusion based on given premises like a mathematical proof, but only one possible interpretation of given experiences. The religious interpretation is only a possible solution to the problems relating to ethics. There may be other solutions. And finally, one could, of course, choose to leave the problems raised by ethics unresolved. There are no demonstrable solutions to them. The religious interpretation is therefore simply just a reasoned interpretation, which one can choose or not, and not proof. Taking the religious interpretation as being true partly involves a personal choice. On the other hand, the religious interpretation does not simply reflect an arbitrary, subjective choice. There are many universal human experiences to which reference can be made when arguing in favour of the truth of the religious interpretation. It is a reasoned interpretation.
3. Religion and view of the world

The religious perspective can also contribute to the fight against global warming by providing an ethical view of the world. In our modern, secularised world, the relationship between world view and ethics is a problematic one. The trouble is that natural science has been elevated to the status of world view. The scientific description of the natural world and the universe virtually has a monopoly on telling us what the natural world and the universe basically are. Natural science is not simply seen as a particular method for investigating the phenomena of the natural world and the universe. It is seen as a view of the world or ontology, i.e. a doctrine about the real world. Natural science is not simply seen as one perspective among others, but as the only true perspective which one can and should apply to the world. This is what is called scientism, and it exercises a very strong ideological power in the modern world (Stenmark 2001).

The problem with scientism in relation to ethics is that a scientific view of the world works against ethics. If we adopt natural science as our view of the world, ethics loses its basis in reality; in fact, the question is whether the scientistic view of the world does not, in reality, cancel out ethics, turning ethics into an illusion. Ethics becomes homeless in the world. According to the natural scientific world picture, the universe and the natural world are basically made up of random, nonconscious, dead material which is controlled by mechanical, nonconscious laws and accidental occurrences. But we have no ethical obligations towards random, nonconscious, impersonal material. We can do with it exactly what we want. In this view, the Earth with its multitudinous forms of life cannot be seen as our neighbour for whom we are responsible. Ethical reasoning is a problem for such a world view.

The question is which world view can be used as a basis for ethics? As mentioned before, the religious world view can, for example, as it is a characteristic of the religious world view that all living things are seen as being part of the cosmic community. All things are seen as being related to each other and mutually dependent. The Buddhist Thich Nhat Hahn writes:

When we look at a chair, we see the wood, but we fail to observe the tree, the forest, the carpenter, or our own mind. When we meditate on it, we can see the entire universe in all its interwoven and interdependent relations in the chair. The presence of the wood reveals the presence of the tree. The presence of the leaf reveals the presence of the sun. The presence of the apple
blossoms reveals the presence of the apple... The chair is not separate. It exists only in its interdependent relations with everything in the universe. It is because all other things are.

(Quoted from McFague, 2008: 51)

According to the religious world view we are all members of a community and related to one another. We are all created and bound together by Creation, as expressed by the big creational religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. We live vulnerably in the hands of each other. Children are handed to their parents, parents are handed to other people, people are handed to the natural world and the planet, which in return is handed to people. Everything is handed to everything and thereby bound in a common destiny. Everything affects everything and everyone who can have a responsibility therefore have one.

Some may ask whether this interdependence of which the faiths are speaking is not described in the natural scientific discipline, ecology. Today, we have an exact natural scientific discipline which much better and much more accurately and rationally describes what the faiths are talking about.

The connectedness of everything is an important religious theme. From sun to life to apple blossoms to apple to sensing and taste. We are closely connected with the world of which we are a part.
in a more vague and imprecise way. Natural science must replace religion. But if we replace the religious ecological world view with the natural scientific ecological world view, then we again run into problems with ethics. The natural scientific ecology describes the natural world as made up of mechanical, impersonal systems. The ecological aspects of the natural world are described in terms such as ‘food chains’, ‘biomass’, ‘energy flows’ etc., phenomena with which we cannot relate ethically. When the religious ecological world view sees life as a woven blanket and humans as a thread in it, then it is not an interrelated system of impersonal material, but the beauty of life which evokes wonder, admiration, awe and love of our common destiny and its individual members.

When, today, there is general agreement that we must take an ecological approach to the world, the question is whether this ecological world view is not, in effect, a modern universal religious world view as it amounts to a comprehensive ethical view, which is exactly what characterises a religious interpretation of the world. The religious interpretation is determined by being an interpretation of the world which sees the world as a whole, and by being an interpretation which contains some element of action orientation. We cannot proceed from the natural scientific ecology to what we understand by taking an ecological approach to the world. Natural science involves no action orientation. Natural science only says how something is, and not how it ought be. The ecological approach has a universal religious foundation, whether we perceive ourselves as religious or not. Our natural scientific ecology can, at best, contribute to our ecological knowledge; it cannot create an ecological attitude.

The universal religious world view is rooted in our pre-scientific experience. Before taking a natural scientific view of humans and animals and plants, we see them as living, vulnerable creatures which are valuable in themselves, and good reasons must be given if we are to interfere with them. Nobody must destroy humans or animal and plant species without good reason. This view is articulated in the common natural languages and in art based on immediate sensations and experience. Thus, the religious interpretation – that the natural world and its creatures are created – is not without a basis of experience. Since the early twentieth century, the phenomenological philosophy has delivered an in-depth defence of the validity of pre-scientific cognition. Here, wide-ranging arguments are found in favour of pre-scientific cognitions being cognitions in their own right. They are neither precursors of a more precise natural scientific cognition or illusions. The pre-scientific cognition is a comprehensive cognition which is more fundamental for our cognition of the world than
the particular regional perspective of natural science.

It is possible that the religious interpretation can contribute a world view which, at the same time, consolidates ethics in an ontology and leaves room for natural science so that it can be a servant to ethics and not its opponent. The natural scientific knowledge and the natural scientific technologies can be a servant to ethics if they are not elevated to being a world view. As stated earlier, the way in which we fundamentally see the world is of decisive importance because our world view determines our attitude to what we see. If we see something as worthless and if we are convinced that it is basically of a random nature, then we will, of course, end up treating it as worthless. The natural scientific view of the world cannot explain the ethical project, and it cannot provide us with the meaning of life. It is a void which the religious interpretation of life may contribute to filling. The natural scientific world picture almost automatically assumes the role of world view because there is no alternative even though it looks as if the natural scientific world picture falls short of being able to play the role of world view and provide a philosophy of life.

But surely modern, democratic societies cannot adopt a religious world view? No, we cannot elevate a specific faith to providing the horizon for society’s world view, but the question is whether a universal religious philosophy of creation which builds on universally human experience and not a specific belief in particular revelations, cannot provide a horizon for society’s world view? For example, it may be worth discussing whether the UN’s Declaration of Human Rights, which is based on the assumption that every human being has unconditional value in itself, is not based on a creational philosophy. Some would say that unconditional value is something we confer on ourselves, and it is, of course, right that it is something which we as a society decide. But the question is whether it is a random decision. Could we just as well decide that only white males have unconditional value? If it is not a random decision, then the question is what is forcing us, and that is a question which is open to interpretation based on a philosophy of creation. The same applies to the UN’s ‘Earth Charter’ from the year 2000, the first principle of which is: ‘Respect Earth and life in all its diversity.’ How does one explain such a principle? There can be no doubt that a universally religious explanation is one possibility.

But is a world view not something individual, private? A society does not have and should not have a world view. However, the question is whether all social orders and all political ideologies do not imply a world view which is open to discussion. No society can exist without common laws. But do common laws not imply a minimum of common ethics, and do ethics not
imply a minimum of common world view? Claiming that rights are simply something which we confer on ourselves and the natural world also amounts to a world view, i.e. the world view that humans alone can confer value. Does a humanistic liberal ideology, a socialist ideology, a Nazi or communist ideology not actually contain a philosophy about humans and the world? It is obvious that the social order of some near-Eastern countries implies an Islamic philosophy of humans and the world.

If it is true that human rights (and nature’s rights) are open to interpretation based on creational philosophy, then perhaps all social orders based on human rights imply a philosophy of creation world view. You can, of course, elect not to explicate this implicit philosophy, but that will not make it go away. Fundamental questions do not disappear by not addressing them, as some people seem to think. Again, all this does not mean that we must necessarily adopt the philosophy of creation interpretation. It is only one possibility. We can, for example, stop at observing that human rights (and nature’s rights) are random, and leave it at that. There is no proof that this means that their unconditional significance stems from a power of being.

Some may object that you cannot use religious arguments in a modern, secular society. That depends what you mean by religious arguments. You cannot argue using arguments based on belief and special revelations, but you can argue using universal religious arguments based on universal human experience and reflections as they are of a philosophical nature. Regardless of beliefs and convictions, everybody can take a stand because they cite universal experience which everybody can judge. It is debatable whether a universal religious world view is better than a scientistic, a secularist, a Nazi, a humanistic etc. world view.

It is not all elements from the historical religions as such which can contribute to a modern, democratic society’s fight against global warming. Religious elements which are suppressive to women, which do not respect human rights, which are against freedom of speech and the freedom of the press, which go against democratic principles of law etc. are useless. The contribution from the faiths requires a non-fundamentalist, non-dogmatic understanding of religion. It assumes that you must understand the faiths as interpretations of the holy, the untouchable, sacrosanct, the divine. These interpretations are not bound to the world picture or social order which was prevalent at the time at which the faith was formulated in writing. At the core of religious faith is not a belief in a particular world picture or a particular historical social order, but a belief in that which must not be outraged, the holy and the divine. What is at the core of religion can and must therefore be expressed on different historical and social terms than the original. The
core content of the faiths can and must today be formulated on the terms of our modern, democratic society.

The religious interpretation can, if adopted, explain ethics and endow our lives with meaning and meaningful goals for our actions. Deep convictions about meaning and meaningfulness are the best and most durable motivation for ethical commitment there are. Politics, economics and the state’s regulations of the market and the curbing of individual and group interests are necessary means to creating the fabric of an ethically sound society and to protecting the diversity of life on the planet, but they are only means and can never be ends in themselves.

4. Religion and politics

Many would probably say that the fight against climate change is a political issue we should not mix up with religion. This is both right and wrong.

There are two levels to politics. One level concerns the political strategies which we need to solve society’s problems. Should top-rate tax be abolished or not, should Denmark launch itself into another huge bridge-building project or not? In this context, politics divides us. We disagree wildly on the question of which political ideologies and strategies would create the best society for all. At that level, politics and religions should not be mixed up. A specific political solution can only be explained pragmatically and never religiously. For example, it is hugely unacceptable calling the Iraq war a ‘crusade against evil’, as President Bush did, instead of explaining it as an act of self-defence. If we mix politics and religion at this level, the religious contribution invariably becomes fanatical and self-righteous. Religion should not monopolise solutions to problems. It should not divide us in the face of a shared problem.

The other level is the level which concerns society’s common core values and objectives. Here, politics is about what we have in common. The abolition of slavery, the fights against poverty and disease etc. are fundamental political objectives which unite us, and to which the fight against climate change has now been added. There are no serious political parties which, in their political programme, call for the reintroduction of slavery or an end to the fight for social justice and welfare and the battle against disease. Often this level of politics is forgotten, the level which does not divide us, but which unites us, because we are hypnotised by the daily political dogfight and the entertaining mudslinging, but it is very important to pay attention to it. No society can survive without a minimum of core values and objectives. At this level, mixing religion and politics does not create
such huge problems because here religion and politics are about what we have in common. However, the risk is that religion is reduced to simplified messages, which are what politics is largely made up of, and thereby the religious contribution to the debate becomes banal and uninteresting.

The strongest cohesiveness in a society stems from the fact that, behind all differences, common objectives exist with which everybody can identify and feel a sense of solidarity. One can say that the common objective which for the past few centuries, and despite all disagreements, has united the political endeavours of the developed countries is the fight against hunger and poverty. This objective has now largely been fulfilled, at least in the western world. We therefore need a new overall objective behind which to unite.

Perhaps we should have even more consumer goods and even more luxury? Luxury is not a sustainable objective for society. It is not worthy. Particularly not when you give thought to the fact that the luxury is achieved at the expense of the poor countries, the natural world and the elements. The ethical failing is obvious. We cannot identify with a society whose objectives are consumerism and luxury; it would simply disintegrate. Where a shared worthy objective should be, there is only a void. Here, the ethical-religious vision can provide a worthy overall objective which could unite our joint endeavours, i.e. the objective of working to protect the diversity and beauty of the planet. Religion can contribute the vision which is necessary to lay down and explain such a new, sustainable objective which could give, in particular, the rich countries back their dignity. But can we ever agree on a common objective? It is not completely out of the question. For example, it looks as if we could agree on fighting hunger and poverty, so why should we not be able to agree on a new elementary objective: Not to ruin the admirable planet on which we live. We cannot agree on objectives which we ourselves make up and choose, but perhaps we can agree on objectives which are so elementary that we do not choose them, but they choose us. They are presenting themselves of their own accord and in such a pressing manner that it is hard not to identify with them.

References


