
Response to the Church of Sweden's 'The Bishops' letter about the climate' and Welcome (back) to Archbishop Jackelén

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Archbishop Antje Jackelén, LSTC Adjunct Professor of Systematic Theology, delivered the 2015 Commencement Address at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. During her time in Chicago, the LSTC Board of Directors and Faculty read and discussed a letter about the climate approved by the bishops of the Church of Sweden at the Bishops' Conference of 2014 (A Bishops' letter about the climate, Uppsala: Ineko, 2014). One of the formal responses to the letter was presented by Dr. Vítor Westhelle, which lifted up in particular the theological convictions about spirituality and theological anthropology present in the bishops' letter, a letter that calls the global church to action in the face of the threat of climate change. NOTE: Page numbers in parentheses are references to the English edition of the letter.

The text you presented us, Archbishop, is a theological summons to awaken the people of God of any and all idioms aimed at raising our consciousness to address what is likely the “biggest common challenge ever faced by humanity” (9). It is a candid and yet attentive and caring pastoral letter that brings together the best information methodically gathered as to the state of the planet, so as to present the possible future scenarios that a scientifically informed rationality allows us to envisage. The “letter” offers concrete and objectively formulated courses of action to be taken at individual and corporate, national and planetary, denominational and ecumenical levels. The point is well made and indisputably persuasive. But this is the problem: how come lethargy and worse forms of irresponsibility prevent us from taking more decisive actions? And action now!

In answering this, the “letter” refers us to spirituality; but not a disembodied spiritualism. It calls for a creation spirituality that asserts that this world matters, matter matters, for it is a creation of the word that was at the beginning as the “Bishops' letter” reminds us quoting John 1:1. Here we find an appeal to an article of faith that joins Christology to creation theology. There is, as the document emphatically states, a “radical affinity between the Creator and creation in Jesus” (62). This is a clear Lutheran move that can affirm, as Luther and the Confessions do, God's presence in all there is, transcending all, yet closer to anything as anything is to its own self in accordance to matter! This is Lutheran lingo, but it finds its counterpart in the eastern-orthodox notion of *mysterium*, and in the Roman Catholic concep-

tion of the “sacramentals,”—material conduits of the divine grace, which are not unlike the avatars of Hinduism or the Shekinah in Hebraic tradition. Nature is mysterious, sacramental by virtue of being the creation of the word. This world is the Word's dwelling place where it finds its presence (*parousia*). Psalms 24 and 104 are called upon to offer doxological expressions of this faith, this spirituality enmeshed in the stuff of this earthy world.

In the midst of this world human beings have been placed, created to be co-creators as co-participants in God's continuing work of creation (62f.). Psalm 8 is lifted up to celebrate human dignity. Yet herein lies the problem. This human being created to cooperate with God (*cooperatio hominum cum deo*—as Luther phrased it) is the one that bears the responsibility for being the likely cause of violating irreversibly the integrity of all God has made and brought into being. (Notice that the “letter” is very cautious about making conclusive statements that cannot not be backed up by reliable data!) Sin is the name we give to this violation and rape of nature. This seems a theological contradiction to attribute the highest dignity to humans within the whole of creation, but who are at the same time the main source of corruption that now reaches cosmic proportions never seen before.

However, this double characteristic of the human being having immense dignity and simultaneously manifesting utter depravity is a contradiction only and insofar as we think about the chain of being as placing humans at the top in the order of neurological complexity of living beings. The “letter” suggests a counterintuitive understanding, a reversion in the common assumption about the chain of being. This reversion assumes the dignity of the human in the fact that God in Christ has reached so profoundly into the depth of creation as to reach humans, even humans. This is the “inscrutable way of God” into the “depth of riches” as Saint Paul says with incisive acumen (Rom 11:33). This manner of seeing the “way of God” is insightfully formulated by Saint Athanasius who in the fourth century asks rhetorically, “Why, then, did [the Word] not appear by means other and nobler parts of creation, and use some nobler instruments, as the sun, or the moon, or stars, or fire, or air, instead of a man merely?” (Here the exclusive language is indeed justifiable!) And he answers: “The Lord came not to make a display, but to heal and teach those who were suffering.” This is what places the human being in a paradoxical situation, but

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not a contradictory one. And this is precisely why Saint Irenaeus, a century earlier, said that the glory of God is a living human being. The expression he uses for “living human being” is *zōn anthrōpos*, not *biōn anthrōpos*. This means that the glory of God is a human being sharing the life of the whole of creation, and not the peculiarly qualified human life in distinction to the rest of living organisms. If that were intended, he would have used the word *bios*. But no, the Glory of God is the human being sharing the life of all the organisms that populate the earth, the “merely human” to whom the highest dignity has been bestowed.

The “Bishops’ letter” is a call for a conversion, for a *metanoia*, a reversion in our way of thinking, which is also our way of being. A conversion but not from the world, instead a conversion to the world to the earth, to the *humus* that makes the truly human (the adam who was made from *adamah*, the fertile soil Gen 2:7) into the inscrutable depth of the merely human. *Metanoia*, the reordering of the mind, implies then also the conversion, the turning around of our conception of the chain of being. This makes sense and is understandable, for it calls us into accountability to the very ground of our beings. This older way of conceiving the incarnation would appear again in Saint Francis, and in Luther’s theology of the cross, but for the most it has fallen into oblivion in Western theology.

There is yet another move that the “letter” makes. It not only recognizes that the effects of our irresponsibility affect everyone in the world, but also, and this is decisive, that everyone shares responsibility. One of the confessions of sin of the Church of Sweden that is uplifted in the “Bishops’ letter” says, “I have shared in the alienation of the world from God.” This is a precious liturgical formulation of what in theology has been called structural sin. Even as the document calls upon individuals and particular nations to change their ways according to their peculiar circumstances, this confession of sin in the “letter” does more than that. It is issued in the name of the Church of Sweden by its bishops, representing a particular church in a particular country. This country, Sweden, has taken more measures than most countries in the world to address the climate change challenge, and is also one of the countries that is likely to be the least affected by the consequences of human-caused climatic change and disasters. This document, instead of pointing fingers at obvious culprits, calls upon the very people it addresses to atone, not for the presumed amount of quantifiable shortcomings of Sweden, but instead for being part of humanity that share the same household, the same *oikos*. It explicitly disavows lack of repentance on account of oth-

ers fairing much worse in climatic awareness and responsibility indexes. The deplorable cases of the United States and China are mentioned in order not to be used as an excuse, and the opposite could also be said of Third World countries that are becoming disproportionate victims of an evil they had been less responsible for. This conversion that the “letter” calls upon tells us about the profound meaning of Christian love, and brings home the words of Jesus to the woman who loved: “her sins, which are many, are forgiven ... but the one who is forgiven little, loves little” (Luke 7:47). Paraphrasing: the one who confesses to a great sin also shows great love. This “letter” is a confession of sin, of a great sin that the authors know themselves a part of. This is a confession that goes so deep because it attests to a great love. The Bishops’ letter about the climate is a letter of love. It is a love letter!

The Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago is in the process of remembering the Reformation for awakening us to the gift that keeps on giving. This love letter is a reminder of the gift that prompts us to give. And nothing is a more concrete expression of this gift than God’s creation in which life emerges and thrives. As the Danish theologian cum philosopher Søren Kierkegaard said with incisiveness, the greatest gesture of love is the gift that cannot be returned. Yet it can keep on giving for it is gratis, it is grace alone. When the “Bishops’ letter” says that “in the realm of God everything is a gift before it becomes a task,” (8) it is also saying that the task is nothing but to keep on sharing the gift. The love of the neighbor shown toward the one that has fallen in the hands of robbers (56, Luke 10:25–37) is the love toward the generations of children, grandchildren, and the great-grandchildren of humanity. The generations to come have fallen into the hands of the robbers of the future. An index of the loot taken is measurable. In the May 17, 2015, issue of the Chicago Tribune there was an article about the disintegration of the oldest mummies in the world. These mummies of 5000 BC are in the Atacama Desert in northern Chile. The mummies started a process of rapid disintegration in the last ten years with the increase of humidity in the desert. Most of the mummies are of children and even of fetuses who were killed 7000 years ago by arsenic poison after a volcanic eruption. Harvard scientist Ralph Mitchell stated that this is the first example of a tragedy he documented that is “caused by climate change.” Those children of the Atacama whose memory was preserved to register a story of a natural disaster, which is now being erased, are now telling the story of children to come who are falling victims not of a volcano but of their own forebears.

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The whole debate regarding climate change is muddled by ideological disputes and self-serving bigotry masked by pious fundamentalism or even pretense scientific claims. But it is, in fact, simple, quite simple. Let the children receive the gift! There, where the children receive the gift, is God's realm present, because children are the ones who know how to receive a gift. So, the message of love is simple: Let's stop the contraband of the future and let's let the gift keep on giving. We have been set free not to smuggle the future of the coming generations of humanity, not to squander the gift of the children. Indeed, we are often those disciples preventing the children from receiving the gift (Luke 18:16).

The picture sometimes looks dismal. The "letter" however is a love letter. Love letters don't end in doom and calamity. This is the one point in which a letter that stays away from making irrevocable judgments emphatically issues an anathema to an apocalypticism that causes paralysis and brings about despair. On the contrary it calls upon an eschatology grounded in hope,

even after all things are considered, even after all our expectations, wishes, and yearnings are dashed. There is this hope against all hope, the resurrection hope that Saint Paul speaks about (Rom 4:18). Here once more the affinity of creation theology and Christology is affirmed. The P account of creation culminates in the Sabbath as the text of the "letter" reminds us (60). This Sabbath, as in the narrative, is the first day (!) of human beings, and is to be repeated and renewed for the restoration of life in every jubilee; that is resurrection. The Sabbath of the creation story is the Sabbath for life to be born again on Easter. It is the Sabbath of emptiness, the summon for all of us to live out the cosmic season of Lent for the work of the Spirit to renew the face of the earth, so that matter may be what God intended it to be, the cradle of emerging life. One needs to be a materialist, to believe in the resurrection, in the emergence of life by the power of the Spirit. Meanwhile we keep the Sabbath as the place of wonder that, says the "letter," is brought forth by "sharing the gift of life" (6).