

God – justice – climate change

Jan-Olav Henriksen
Norwegian School of Theology, Norway
Jan.o.henriksen@mf.no

Abstract

The climate catastrophe changes theology to think about the relationship between our faith in God, the endangered creation, and justice. Although the change affects a living beings on the planet – and not only humans – the human responsibility for dealing with the issue cannot be separated from how we practice faith in God. God is the God of all, and the precarious and vulnerable situation of humans who suffer from the consequences of climate change represents a call to prophetic action and to affirm a shared community among a living beings. The resources of the Christian tradition can be employed to support this task.

Uncertainty and ambiguity emerge here as resources, because they force us to confront those things, we really want – not safely in some distant and contested future, but justice and self-understanding now.
– Sheila Jasanoff

Keywords

justice, climate change, vulnerability, embodiment

Introduction

As Bruno Latour¹ claimed, nature is no longer the stable backdrop for human agency. The climate crisis witnesses to how nature and all of God's

1 Bruno Latour, "Agency at the Time of the Anthropocene," *New literary history* 45, no. 1 (2014): 5, <https://doi.org/10.1353/nlh.2014.0003>,

creation are linked together: Nature responds to human activity, adapts and adjusts itself – and deteriorates and is destroyed in ways that sometimes seem irreparable. Moreover, the climate crisis is also a testimony to how human societies have been built on the exploitation of other humans, of natural resources, and on colonial practices that continue. Western societies colonize the atmosphere with their emissions and contribute to the deterioration of land, the increase of flooding and drought, and thus also the decreasing means for living in the 2/3 parts of the world. Thereby, the gap between North and West and the global South continues to widen. Injustices continue, and we can continue to observe the political deferring of the necessary means and actions for countering the crisis and avoiding its worst consequences.

For theology, the climate catastrophe changes the way we think about God and justice. Given the unequal distribution of both wealth and carbon emissions on our globe, the question about justice becomes more imminent than ever. What can prophetic Christian theology offer to think about such issues? What are the practices Christians should engage in to hamper the ongoing developments towards an increasingly deteriorating environment? What is climate justice – is it possible – and how? And what has God to do with it?

The Christian God is not the God of the rich. God is the God of all. That has political implications that also points in the direction of another concept of justice than the one who identifies justice with the positively given laws or bases it only on the desert of the individual.

Several decades ago, Jürgen Habermas pointed to how the notion of God functions within the context of modern society, as opposed to notions of God based in particular, restricted communal contexts. He writes:

The idea of God is sublated (*aufgehoben*) into a concept of a Logos that determines the community of believers and the real life-context of a self-emancipating society. “God” becomes the name for a communicative structure that forces human beings, on pain of a loss of their humanity, to go beyond their accidental, empirical nature

to encounter one another indirectly, that is, across an objective something that they themselves are not.²

Considering what these remarks may entail for the understanding of the relationship between God, justice, and the climate catastrophe, we can infer the following: God thus understood suggests an instance that does not go up in, or can be identified, with what is the actual and factual existence of society: If God enables humans to *become free*, God has to be thought of as something different from the determining factors of society. I.e., God has to be distinguished from, but not disconnected from the everyday. The element of transcendence in the idea of God is exactly what allows different members of society to address each other and their conditions on other terms than those present at hand. As the symbol God points to something beyond the immediacy of the finite situation at hand,³ it allows for a kind of universalism in which every human being is on equal standing with every other. This is a major component for a Christian understanding of justice.

Furthermore, the non-empirical and counter-factual content of the idea about God – that God may point to something that is not yet realized and present at hand – may open up to understanding humans as more than what they are in terms of their actual empirical existence. For Jürgen Habermas, “God” indicates a structure of social communication in which the participants are forced to recognize each other as more than what is given with their actual concrete existence.⁴ This mutual recognition implies mutual respect and enables solidarity. In philosophical terms, this is what is often referred to as human dignity, for which theology uses the notion of the image of God. The image of God is not an empirical feature but implies exactly the recognition of the human being as more than what is present.

2 Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1988). 121. I have adjusted the translation somewhat comparing with the German text.

3 Cf. for a more extensive development of these points, Jan-Olav Henriksen, *Finitude and Theological Anthropology: An Interdisciplinary Exploration into Theological Dimensions of Finitude* (Leuven: Peeters, 2011). See also, with a harsh criticism of naïve notions of God as a finite entity in Dawkins et al., Terry Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, & Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate* (New Haven [Conn.]: Yale University Press, 2009).

4 Cf. Jürgen Habermas, *Zur Rekonstruktion Des Historischen Materialismus*, 1. Aufl. ed., Suhrkamp-Taschenbuch Wissenschaft 154 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1976), 101.

Hence, there is a close correspondence between human dignity and the idea of God.

Accordingly, God serves as a “placeholder” (Platzhalter) for a communicative space where human dignity and the common ground is secured for all. In that regard, religion, by means of its central symbol, contributes to the critical evaluation of traits in the development of the contemporary society. Hence, both reason (logos) and the recognition of a humans allows for these traditions to transcend the “tribal,” “ethnic” or nationalist conceptions. This move leads more than anything to an understanding of humanity in solidarity, and to a common moral obligation to overcome injustice no matter who suffers from it. Hence, there is in Habermas’ reading of the impact of religion a strong tendency to interpret it as one in which the moral substance of universalistic ethics is backed up by, and is developed from, universally oriented religious traditions.

However, we need to go beyond Habermas and speak about solidarity in a wider sense that also encompasses more than other humans. We need to live in solidarity with the rest of the life on this planet as well. Hence, we are responsible for more than other humans and need to recognize this widened scope as a constitutive element in justice. Justice is today not possible without the solidary responsibility that also comprises a living beings. We share our destiny with the rest of the planet, and can no longer separate history and nature, human agency and nature, human life, and the life of other species totally from each other.

The common destiny of humanity and the rest of nature is perhaps never more visible than when we consider our shared vulnerability – a trait that modern technology constantly attempts to overcome and control. Today, we know that we need another approach to nature than that of control and domination. We need to recognize how human vulnerability and the vulnerability of everything and everyone else is linked closely together.

To understand human life from the point of view of vulnerability roots the responsibility that humans have for each other and for nature in a phenomenon that is deeply relational and which has social and political dimensions. It makes it obvious that the moral obligation that humans have towards each other is not rooted in convention, will, or human decision, but in features that exist prior to our decisions. The deterioration of nature,

and the concomitant consequences such as poverty, lack of health, access to resources and a safe environment can be identified as crucial and basic problems of humanity, but they are not problems only for us: scarcity of resources, violence, injustice, unequal distribution and lack of access to care is also caused by how our economic system presupposes the exploitation and extraction of natural resources that benefit the few, and which is not sustainable for the good life of a life involved.

However, it need not be like this. Responsibility for a just society builds on the recognition of how the conditions are possible to address by means of human action and transformative practices. This means taking up responsibility by transforming relationships and opening up for a wider understanding of the web of nature in which we are entangled.

Nico Koopman writes aptly about this when he points to how “True humanity is not defined by independence and rationality, but by the willingness to enter into relationships with others. [...] We receive our existence out of the relationship with the other, and my existence is meaningful because there are others who want to share their existence with me.” Like others, he is also pointing to the fundamental character of dependence and vulnerability in human existence.⁵ Furthermore, Koopman suggests that significant elements for orientation and transformation in this regard can be found in the biblical narratives’ repeated pointing to God’s identification with those who suffer.⁶ This acknowledgment of God’s active participation in and relating to suffering can thereby be articulated in ways that provide chances for dealing with the planet’s (and not only human) vulnerability.

However, the necessary transformations are not the task of the individual. As sociologist Bryan Turner points to, humans have established institutions in order to make sure that the vulnerable condition of humanity is taken care of. “In order to protect themselves from the uncertainties of the everyday world, they must build social institutions (especially political, familial, and cultural institutions) that come to constitute what we call ‘society.’” He goes

5 Nico Koopman, “Vulnerable Church in a Vulnerable World? Towards an Ecclesiology of Vulnerability,” *Journal of Reformed Theology* 2, no. 3 (2008): 245.

6 Cf. *Ibid.*, 238.

on, in a way that also points to how these institutions themselves must be seen as vulnerable and in need of protection:

We need trust in order to build companionship and friendship to provide us with means of mutual support. We need the creative force of ritual and the emotional ties of common festivals to renew social life and to build effective institutions, and we need the comforts of social institutions to fortify our individual existence. Because we are biologically vulnerable, we need to build political institutions to provide for our collective security. These institutions are themselves precarious, however, and cannot work without effective leadership, political wisdom, and good fortune to provide an enduring and reliable social environment.⁷

Human institutions can secure environmental justice – nothing else can. However, justice needs institutions that foster solidarity and recognition of those who suffer, not only in a human society, but also due to the actions and practices that human society inflict on other living species. Turner argues that when humans are aware of and share their experiences of vulnerability, “this shared world of risk and uncertainty results in sympathy, empathy, and trust, without which society would not possible.”⁸ Hence, “the experience of vulnerability provides a norm for the assertion of a human bond across generations and cultures, and this cross-cultural characteristic of vulnerability presupposes the embodiment of the human agent.”⁹ However, as suggested in my critique of Habermas earlier, the circle of commitment must include more than the members of the human society.

7 Bryan S. Turner, *Vulnerability and Human Rights* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 26.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid., 35. Cf. also Sturla Stålsett, who addresses the contemporary global situation with reference to “the precariat” thus: “Without experiencing ourselves as vulnerable, true empathy, ethical action or solidarity is impossible. That is why the common experience of the vulnerability or precariousness of the precariat could be seen as a resource for its common action, and not as something that necessarily should give reason to despair, nor, much less, make the precariat potentially dangerous.” Sturla J. Stålsett, “Prayers of the Precariat? The Political Role of Religion in Precarious Times,” *Estudos Teológicos* 58, no. 2 (2018): 421.

The embodiment of human agents manifests the direct connection humans have to the rest of nature. Embodiment can open us up to the experiences of inequality of power, asymmetry, unequal access to resources, and different modes of dependency. “Those who are in the more powerful position owe those who are in the less powerful position respect and responsible behavior given this vulnerable relationship,” Turner writes.¹⁰

This fact leads to the need for acknowledging the moral dimension for each individual along the lines of vulnerability, because, as Sturla Stålsett writes, “in any relation of dependency, there is power, and ca for responsibility. Your dependency on me gives me power over you.” But the presence of vulnerability in such a situation makes one aware of that responsibility. Furthermore, “my own awareness of being a vulnerable person provides me with resources (knowledge, experiences, competence, fantasy, creativity, ...) in my effort to respond as properly as possible to the demand issued by the vulnerability of the other.”¹¹

Stålsett moves on from the registration of the basis for ethics in vulnerability towards a theological proposal. He holds that “Christian faith in God provides resources to uphold and protect this vision of the value of human vulnerability” (my emphasis). This position is not uncontroversial. Traditionally, mainstream doctrinal Christianity sees God as immutable and impassible, and, therefore, as invulnerable.¹² However, Stålsett argues in favor of seeing God “as affected by suffering – a vulnerable God (*Deus vulnerabilis*).” He argues – in my view correctly – that this approach provides a “more adequate interpretation of the normative Christian sources (identity) and takes better into account contemporary human experiences and knowledge (relevance).”¹³

This is not an academic enterprise aimed at the change of a specific conception of God. The notion of a vulnerable God who relates to vulnerable humans is

10 Cf. Heike Springhart, “Exploring Life’s Vulnerability: Vulnerability in Vitality,” in *Exploring Vulnerability*, ed. Heike Springhart, Günter Thomas (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017), 30.

11 Sturla J. Stålsett, “Towards a Political Theology of Vulnerability: Anthropological and Theological Propositions,” *Political Theology* 16, no. 5 (2015): 469.

12 Ibid., 476.

13 Ibid., 477.

inherently related to how the Christian faith is practiced: Accordingly, the symbol of a vulnerable God opens up to “a political theology that enhances human vulnerability as a value, thus promoting a different understanding of political power from the prevailing one, often informed and shaped by illusions of invulnerability.”¹⁴ This political theology he describes as follows:

Based on theological interpretations of human life as constitutively vulnerable, and of God as having chosen to be affected by vulnerability, a (cosmo-)political theology of vulnerability should provide resources for understanding and exercising political power in ways that enhance, protect, and promote human life in community as vulnerable and yet good. In short, if God’s ways in this world are embracing and protecting vulnerability, this should influence the way in which we interpret the political field, and exercise political power.¹⁵

According to Stålsett, the only type of religiosity that takes vulnerability fully into account is the ecumenical and liberation-oriented, which is critical of economic globalization and the “increased focus on wealth that creates social inequalities and environmental damage.”¹⁶ The political and social focus in this type of religiosity establishes a firm link between vulnerability and social justice backed by powerful symbols that expresses God and God’s will. Thus, the vulnerable creation becomes linked to justice and to a God that is involved with and cares for God’s creation.

Perhaps there is one more experiential element that religious traditions, including the Christian, stewards that can be relevant in this context: That of being connected to both past and future generations. In his analysis of how human alienation is manifest in the environmental crisis and in our constitutive inability to live sustainably, sociologist Hartmut Rosa asks with reference to so-called generational justice, which demands that we leave future generations with enough resources to allow them a successful life, why we should act according to such a moral imperative. Rosa argues that “a person who feels the current of history flowing through her, who

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 Stålsett, “Prayers of the Precariat? The Political Role of Religion in Precarious Times,” 422.

feels such a responsive connection to her ancestors and descendants that they concern her in some way, has no need of such principles to justify living sustainably; she experiences material restrictions not as restrictions at a , but as an element of the establishment of resonance and thus of a successful life.”¹⁷

In other words: The interconnectedness of life, as well as the ability to affirm and accept human limitation and finitude, are among the elements that Christian prophetic theology will have to continue to articulate as part of what it takes to secure practices and actions that can serve the cause of justice in the face of the climate catastrophe.

Bibliography

- Eagleton, Terry 2009. *Reason, Faith, & Revolution : Reflections on the God Debate*. New Haven [Conn.]: Yale University Press.
- Habermas, Jürgen 1998. *Legitimation Crisis*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Habermas, Jürgen 1976. *Zur Rekonstruktion Des Historischen Materialismus*. Suhrkamp-Taschenbuch Wissenschaft 154. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Henriksen, Jan-Olav 2011. *Finitude and Theological Anthropology : An Interdisciplinary Exploration into Theological Dimensions of Finitude*. Leuven: Peeters.
- Koopman, Nico 2008. “Vulnerable Church in a Vulnerable World? Towards an Ecclesiology of Vulnerability.” *Journal of Reformed Theology* 2(3):240–54.
- Rosa, Hartmut 2019. *Resonance : A Sociology of the Relationship to the World*. Medford, MA: Polity Press.
- Springhart, Heike 2017. “Exploring Life’s Vulnerability: Vulnerability in Vitality.” In Heike Springhart & Günter Thomas (eds.). *Exploring Vulnerability*. Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht. 13–33.

17 Hartmut Rosa, *Resonance : A Sociology of the Relationship to the World* (Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2019), 428.