
Foreword

The Anthropocene as a Challenge for Public Theology

Is there something like an Anthropocene? We have good reasons for reflecting upon this question. One thing is clear: human beings now have the power to change the shape of the earth to a degree that once took many thousands, or even millions, of years. There is, therefore, a growing tendency to speak of a new and distinct age, even though we are talking about a relatively short period of time that has brought about these changes.

How fundamental the changes are, and how recently they have developed, Larry Rasmussen impressively shows with a metaphor in his book *Earth Community, Earth Ethics*. He writes of a ten-volume encyclopedia in which the history of the cosmos is written. Even if we skip the first two-thirds of the development of the universe, we still have five billion years in ten volumes. If each volume is 500 pages, each page tells the story of one million years. The most amazing insight of this metaphor concerns the place of humankind and its activities in the development of the universe: humankind arrives on page 499 of the last volume. The last two words of the last page tell the story of human civilization, and the story of the human destruction of nature begins with the last syllable of the last word of the last volume.¹

It is difficult to assess, since we are living in it, whether there is something like an Anthropocene. There are good reasons that the names used to describe a certain age so far have been given afterwards, in looking back. Perhaps we must leave the question unanswered and instead direct our attention to how we should act in a time in which the power of humankind over non-human nature has reached an enormous scale and in which human beings are in the process of destroying the ecological balance which

1. Rasmussen, *Earth Community*, 27–28.

has been the basis of life so far. Politics plays a key role in dealing with this situation. In the future, political decisions must be directed towards transforming the economy from the destruction of non-human nature, with extreme inequalities in the distribution of wealth, towards an ecologically sustainable source of prosperity for all human beings. Politics seems to be incapable, on its own, of achieving this huge but fundamentally necessary reorientation. This is because political decision-making—at least in democracies—tends to be oriented towards and limited by the next election and, as a result, always seeks to secure the consent of the electorate. This is why civil society is so crucial. Civil society paves the way for necessary political change by generating a political climate that is the basis for courageous political decisions.

One should not underestimate what civil society can achieve, especially given the recent rise of an ecological consciousness. Big corporations now pay for expensive whole-page ads in national newspapers to highlight their sustainability scores. Even if one is skeptical of the credibility of such ecological promotion efforts, it is remarkable that big economic players seem to think a good ecological record increases their ability to do business. Compared with a few decades ago when ecological advocacy was hardly more than a niche phenomenon in the public debate, this diagnosis is a big success story of civil society, despite what might still need to be achieved.

Change must happen on a global scale. More than any other political issue, ecological problems do not stop at national borders and can therefore only be responded to through international political action. The months leading up to the climate conference in Paris in December 2015 were an encouraging example of the power of global civil society. The conference's success was widely attributed by its key political actors to the long-term efforts of global civil society. Among the actors of civil society, churches played an important role. In the weeks before the conference, Christians from all over the world, together with people of other religious traditions, walked thousands of miles to Paris in a pilgrimage for justice and peace. In a moving multi-religious ceremony, which I myself participated in, religious leaders from across the globe came together with the pilgrims to hand over 1.7 million signatures to the conveners of the conference. It was a ceremony of joy and hope ending in a dance involving the Archbishop of Cape Town, Thabo Makgoba, and the U.N. climate office director, Christina Figueres, who were then joined by all the participants of the ceremony. Churches are especially important actors in global civil society because they represent a network of locally rooted parishes all over the world with a common universal horizon. This common universal horizon is based on the belief that the earth is God's creation and, therefore, not our possession as human beings

but entrusted to us by God to take good care of. Having “dominion” over the earth as mandated in Genesis 1:26 does not mean exploitation of the earth; it should be understood, rather, as analogous to the governing task of the king in Old Testament texts, which was to care for the poor and vulnerable. Modern thought has perverted the biblical theme of “dominion,” making it into a justification of unlimited human power over non-human nature. What has been misinterpreted as something like a Magna Carta of human power in the Anthropocene is in reality a call to responsibility in the age of human misuse of power.

The role of religions in global civil society in the age of the Anthropocene is especially important for another reason. Religions reach not only the minds of people but also their hearts and, even more, their souls. Since ecological reorientation fundamentally includes (besides political and economic structural changes) a change in lifestyle patterns, the success of the intended transformation is dependent on the input of institutions that reach people at the deep levels of their existence.

A public theology is needed to equip the church with a theological basis to enable her to fulfill this task. Public theology helps societies to understand themselves, to read the signs of the times, to interpret culture, and to provide orientation in a situation of disorientation. Thus, churches have a *hermeneutical task*. Reading the signs of the times in the Anthropocene, for example, could mean showing the imbalance between two possible understandings of the human being that have always been part of human existence. *Human being as shaper* of its destiny has always been a key dimension of humankind’s self-understanding. The biblical call to till and care for the earth (Gen 2:15) is an example of this. The Bible, however, also warns of making the *human being as shaper* into an absolute. The story of the Tower of Babel is an impressive example of this absolutizing; building the tower in order to become as great as God (i.e., wanting to be God) leads to division and destructive consequences for culture.

Human being as receiver marks the opposite pole. Humankind has always seen its own limits. Religion has pointed toward something greater than humankind and has helped us to accept human limitedness. However, there is a danger in this conception as well. If *human being as receiver* is made into an absolute, if it is perverted as a blind subordination to some fate, it pacifies human protest against injustice. Critics of religion like Karl Marx, therefore, have rightly criticized this form of religion as the “opium of the people.” Movements like Latin American liberation theologies have recognized these consequences and, in response, developed theological concepts to understand the Christian faith as a driving force for changing history.

In this interplay between *human being as a shaper* and *human being as a receiver*, an interplay which has characterized human history, we must recognize that in the age of the Anthropocene the balance has unduly shifted towards *human being as a shaper* exerting power over non-human nature. We have unlearned the acceptance of our limits in our relationship with non-human nature. What we need now is an ethic of human self-limitation.

Churches and other religious communities not only have a hermeneutical task, they also have a *political task* in society. They must advocate political and sociocultural change to regain an appropriate power balance between humankind and non-human nature. They can fulfill this task by issuing public statements, such as the call of religious leaders at the climate summit in Paris in 2015. They can intervene directly in political decisions to make their positions known to decision-makers. Furthermore, church leaders can privately or publicly talk with politicians to share their views and argue for change. Finally, churches, through their international networks, can listen to the stories of experiences of injustice and vulnerability from the margins, hand them on to the global centers of power, and hold decision-makers accountable.

The task is enormous. Consequently, churches need to cooperate with other agents of civil society to address the challenges of our times. Drawing on rigorous academic reflection across the disciplines is an important fruit of such cooperation, and so, I wholeheartedly welcome the contributions of this volume. If the time we live in will indeed be named “Anthropocene” by later generations, these contributions will turn out to have been pathfinders for understanding its deep intellectual, cultural, and spiritual grounding.

—Heinrich Bedford-Strohm