



This Economy Kills: Violence in the Anthropocene

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Preparing the Ground

This issue of *Promotio Iustitiae* asks the question: “Environmental and Human Rights Defenders: Criminals or Martyrs?” The answer depends on the value-context of those asking the question and those answering it:

For CEOs of certain companies, Environmental and Human Rights defenders are criminals, for Christians, they are martyrs. The former point to their violation of (ideally) “democratically legitimated laws”, the latter to the fact that there are absolute (moral-ethical) values, e.g. human dignity, which is not subject to majority-minority legitimation, but call for absolute respect.

Similarly in the field of migration policy: States call as criminals those, aiding and abetting “illegal residents” when they offer Church sanctuary to refugees in fear of deportation, because it is considered that they violate the right of states to determine access to their territory. Monasteries and convents offering sanctuary defend themselves by saying that the right of states is secondary to the right of the individual to lead a life without fear or harm and that from there arises the obligation to fellow-human beings to protect them from a situation where they foreseeably suffer harm.

This conflict between money, power and human rights is age-old and well-researched. The common denominator is mostly that there is engagement for concrete and specific people, a defence against clear and obvious violations of individual and group rights. And wherever there is such a visible link, conflicts between value systems are the backdrop – as just illustrated. But: once the human rights side won (e.g. in the case of slavery, voting for women, child labour) it is argued that a “moral revolution” took place successfully and established a new standard of justice.¹

¹E.g. Appiah, K. A. (2010). *Honor Code: How Moral Revolutions Happen*. New York: Norton. And: Otto, I. M., Donges, J. F., & al., e. (4. February 2020). Social tipping dynamics for stabilizing Earth's climate by 2050. Retrieved from Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America: <https://www.pnas.org/content/117/5/2354>

Today, too, we face a moral revolution, creating “martyrs” and “criminals”. But there are important and unique differences to earlier times. For the first time in history, the entire way of organizing society, economy and politics creates duress. People are displaced and killed because of consequences arising from indirect and structural violence, caused at least to a large extent by the present economic order. It is the most comprehensive and complex transformation humanity is having and has to face – and it happens under enormous time pressure.

In this short article I confine myself to explaining relevant questions arising here, hoping that it inspires more relevant experts to look for convincing answers. It will also be a very German point of view since our situation is very different from Colombia or Congo.

What Action does Structural Violence plus Time Pressure Call for?

Ever since Pope Francis’ stated: “This Economy kills!” we have been having discussions whether this must be understood literally or metaphorically, comprehensively or partially, and whether such labelling is constructive or obstructive in the search for improvement. Even though there are many possible positions, consensus is growing that the neoliberal way of doing business with its constitutive elements of lowering wages for the purpose of increasing profits and externalizing costs creates widespread misery and disaster, e.g. inequality, climate change, poisoning of water and soil and so on.

Given the speed of developments (just think of the increase of global average temperatures), this raises the question: How much time do we have before climate tipping points are crossed and things spiral out of control? Here defenders of the present order argue, that innovation and increase in efficiency will do the trick, sceptics argue that we cannot wait for this to happen and that, rather, we need to cut back on economic growth and consumption immediately.

As the last decade shows: Awareness and reform worldwide gathers pace, as indicated by the Paris Agreement, the *FridaysForFuture* movement, and ground-breaking Supreme Court Rulings. But as the last decade also shows: Tipping points come faster than predicted: e.g. the thawing of permafrost is already happening, 70 years too early!

If this is not just an exception in current forecasts, but typical for the course of events to be expected, we should be alarmed: At the rate present destruction and pollution of natural resources displaces people already; further displacement will grow exponentially if climate change continues to accelerate along the pathway suggested by the development of the past decade. This leads to the unavoidable conclusion: The longer we wait to take decisive action, the harder and more unpopular necessary measures will have to be initiated, the more the rights and freedoms of future generations will be infringed – a view put forward in April by the German Constitutional Court when, on those grounds, declaring the climate protection legislation of the present government to be unconstitutional.

These are just some thoughts illustrating why activists for social and climate justice argue that time for reasonable arguments only runs out, and that rather actions need to be taken to put pressure behind arguments and speed things up towards the right direction. And this raises

the question: What kind of actions are we talking about? Peaceful demonstrations only, or something beyond?

If today's economic powers, in collusion with political powers, create violence towards the world's poorest as well as future generations and if the consequences of today's economic paradigm predictably leads to mass misery, then it is justified to say, "This economy kills." It is justified not only in cases where this economy kills directly in a clear 1:1 correspondence as is the case of poisoning water and soil and, in consequence, food. It is also justified in view of scientific evidence proving complex links: The Greenhouse Effect, leading to desertification, starvation and migration, can be linked to human contribution beyond reasonable doubt – especially in view of burning fossil fuels.

If these forms of violence are exercised by the present economic order: Does this not justify corresponding activities of defence? If it is a situation of "emergency" (German "Notstand"), as also Pope Francis perceives certain crises today:² Does it justify self-defence (German: "Notwehr"), a category well enshrined in legislation? Certainly no acts to be taken directly against human beings, but why not against infrastructure or buildings symbolizing these violent structures? For example by organizing blockades in industrial or "business quarters", or by obstructing access to banks and factories or by blocking main traffic arteries, bringing rush hours to a standstill, perhaps even obstructing mining equipment?

This kind of discussion is alive among social and climate activists in Germany, and I am often at a loss for good answers, since these actions may invite violence against the activists in turn. But I am convinced that activities of these mostly young and idealistic people, done under great personal sacrifices, are justifiable and necessary. Not the least, because they accept knowingly and willingly arrest, trial and punishment.

For assistance in reflecting about these issues, I think the prophetic strand of the Bible, Theology of Liberation or Christian literature linked with the Peace Movement provide analogical answers since they, too, dealt with structural, indirect and potential (not imminent) violence.³

Where do Christians Stand?

Clearly, Christian values are important in this conflict both as guidelines and as motivation to do the things which are called for. Just one example: The message of peaceful resistance and overcoming evil with love is most certainly the best way to put things permanently on the right track.

² Pope on climate crisis: Time is running out, decisive action needed (14 June 2019) Retrieved from <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2019-06/pope-declares-climate-emergency.html>

³ My thoughts on that (German only) are here: Alt, J. Gewalt & Gegengewalt: Inwieweit rechtfertigt Engagement gegen den Klimawandel Nötigung und Sachbeschädigung? Von Globalisierung und Armutsbekämpfung: https://www.joergalt.de/fileadmin/Dateien/Joerg_Alt/Forum/GewaltGegengewalt.pdf abgerufen

But are Christians acting decisively, both in accordance with these values and the urgency called for by the present crises? Some do, some don't. In order to understand the situation a bit clearer it helps me to distinguish between Church members and "Value Christians".

Churches, being historically grown institutions, unite a diverse and large number of people among their members, often with diverse positions as existing within any given society. There are saints and sinners, progressive and conservative. Certainly, there are many good things going on, e.g. solidarity with persecuted or poor Christians everywhere, or institutional divestment from fossil stocks and shares. But there are also obstacles for doing the adequate due to historic links and entanglement in worldly affairs and with worldly powers. Three examples:

Prominent scientists, when identifying six Social Tipping Points being able to speed changes into the right direction, addressed one to religious leader: Given the clear link between emerging disasters and fossil fuels, they asked these leaders to declare the continuing use of fossil fuels to be as immoral, as they once denounced the holding of humans as slaves to be immoral.⁴ When I mailed this appeal to German bishops, those answering at all told me to be reasonable: Lorries bringing goods to the starving, for example, still run on diesel fuel, one of them explained to me. This is not wrong, of course, but is it helpful? Perhaps more adequate action could prevent the need of having lorries bringing food to the starving in the first place?

Or: Many states, CSOs, Nobel Laureates, UN-Bodies, millions of people, the Church of the Global South and Pope Francis called for the temporary waiving of patent rights for Covid-19 vaccines. German Bishops, however, in a public statement merely welcomed the debate, thus refusing unequivocal solidarity with Pope Francis and the Church in the South. Their very reasonable and balanced statement now provides legitimation for those opposing the temporary waiver, slows down the debate and endangers the willingness of Big Pharma for good compromises.

Or: In 2018, the Bavarian Prime Minister decreed that each state office and ministry has to put up a Crucifix in its entrance area as a sign and symbol of Bavarian culture. A storm of protest rose, asking e.g., how this fits with the deportation of refugees to Afghanistan and other "unchristian policies"? Against this protest, again, Conservative Catholics protested in turn, not comprehending how such public support for Christianity by a Christian Politician can be questioned at all!

Another group is what I called "Value Christians", namely those who were at all times attracted to the timeless message of the bible whether or not they are baptized or even members of a Church. Certainly, those people read the bible also from within their own contemporary and "inherited" value context, but they are freer of "traditional" and "institutional" ballast than many Church members and, when in doubt, put Bible Values above other values such as "tradition".

⁴ See Otto & Donges, Footnote 1

Accordingly, many people fighting in the aforementioned areas are not (or no longer) members of institutional Churches, but feel “merely” inspired by the Christian message of love and solidarity. For example:

In Germany, the Co-Leader of the Green Party, Robert Habeck, once told media that he considers himself to be a “secular Christian”: On the one hand, he does not believe in God and therefore is no member of a Church, but he shares Christian values and respects highly people living and practicing their faith. This triggered critique from Church members, questioning, whether “secular Christians” can exist at all outside Churches. Those probably did not know Karl Rahner’s concept of “anonymous Christians” which, I think, fits on people like Robert Habeck.

A similar observation is possible, when looking at alliances and coalitions in activities protecting refugees or blocking banks and coal mining facilities: The fight for social and ecological justice unites really strange bedfellows in common action. At the same time: those acting together have no problems with the value-contexts of their co-fighters since they know that they are united in the common strive for a better world. And so on.

The previous leads to the following questions: Who are Christians nowadays and who are follower of Jesus? Those organizing rescue ships to prevent refugees drowning in the Mediterranean or those writing theological treatises on ecumenism? Those paying Church taxes or those acting and fighting in the Spirit of Jesus who once threw merchants and money lender out of Gods temple? With St. Augustin we can ask anew: Who is inside, who outside of the Church? Christianity is sorting itself into new arrangements: What type of Church do we need today?

Where do Jesuits Stand?

Recently, a journalist told me that religious orders are among the few Church bodies dealing with the right questions and engaging in the right things. This was kind of him, but even though the Jesuits have 4 Universal Apostolic Preferences which would prompt action in the areas sketched before I have the feeling that most Jesuits are as torn over those issues as other members of Church and society.

There are huge benefits the Society can bring into the present struggle of humanity: Universities, schools, Social Research and Action, outreach to young people, migrants and indigenous... JRS should not/no longer be our token institution to practice solidarity with today’s victims and make their voices heard – inside and outside of the Church!

Would it not be a good idea to incorporate these questions into our annual retreat and to consider from there where our place should be as individual, as community, as province and as Apostolic Body?

Outlook

Today, humanity does not have a deficit of knowledge about both the challenges ahead and the things to do in facing them. We have a problem in implementing the right things rapidly

and decisively. There are many influences delaying progress: Lobbyism, corruption, fear of politicians for re-elections, fear of citizens to be called out of their comfort zones and having to change their life-style and, yes, fear of being criminalized or even penalized....

Christians could be change agents and driver of change. They have a normative compass in the Bible, Christian Ethics/Catholic Social Teaching as well as a Pope with an unequivocal message. And: 2,2 billion Christians are more than a critical mass to initiate Social Tipping Initiatives and move things into the right direction: Research of previous revolutions found that even as little as 3,5% of any given group peacefully resisting the wrong and determinedly working for the right, were often successful. More often, at any rate, than those engaging in violent activities.⁵

In all this I follow Rutger Bregman, who argues: In future it will be more obvious that those called Utopists today are in truth Realists and that those called Realists are in fact Utopists because they misread and misinterpreted the signs of time.⁶

Today we are in the middle of the most important moral revolution of all times. It puts foreseeably the lives of millions at risk and will affect the quality of life of all living beings. Times like these inevitably create its "martyrs" and "criminals". On what side of history do we as Jesuits want to stand?

Original in English

⁵ Robson, D. (14. May 2019). The '3.5% rule': How a small minority can change the world. Retrieved from BBC: <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20190513-it-only-takes-35-of-people-to-change-the-world>

⁶ Bregman, R. (2017). Utopia for Realists - and how we can get there. London: Bloomsbury.