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CHURCHES CONCERN FOR ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES: MAKING SENSE OF A NEW CHRISTIAN DIAKONIA

Summary: Recent years have witnessed an abundance of statements by many Christian Churches aimed at addressing environmental issues, most recently the Catholic Encyclical *Laudato si'*. These documents invite theological engagement, especially after becoming aware of the criticism that such proposals might raise in different social and intellectual settings. This paper tries to expose such criticism and the reasons that could discourage the Church's environmental engagement, to stimulate a critical and dialogical stance able to move into the ongoing discussion and to answer the most pressing questions.

Key words: Christian diakonia, *Laudato si'*, Christian Churches, environmental engagement.

Many Christian Churches have recently addressed environmental issues from a faith-driven perspective. Two more fresh additions to the list are the Swedish Lutheran *A Bishops' letter about the climate* (2014) and the Catholic Encyclical *Laudato si'* (2015). It is relatively easy to find similar statements or documents in other Churches or Denominations published in the last 15 years. For instance, The Anglican Communion in 2002 published a text on *Stewardship of creation*; the Lutheran Missouri Synod, in 2010 published *Together with all creatures*, with the subtitle: *Caring for God's Living Earth* and the United Methodist Church produced a *Statement on environment* (2008). A quick search on the Internet reflects that general concern and shows a kind of broadly shared program transcending confessional boundaries and with few exceptions. Even Evangelicals cannot be excluded from such a sensitivity, despite their traditional positions, or at least not all the them. In several cases, Evangelical voices claim similar motives and engagement, or look for their own specific approach to environmental awareness¹.

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¹ K.K. Wilkinson, *Between God & Green: How Evangelicals Are Cultivating a Middle Ground on Climate Change*, Oxford, New York 2012.

Although the general topic on all these, and many other documents, concern environmental issues, aiming to contribute with a critical and constructive insight, this set of texts suggests much more: a renewed stance from Christian Churches to address present challenges and to raise a voice that was threatened to become very marginal and of little relevance in advanced societies. In all of these cases, we find encouraging texts in which it can be sensed that faith demise and neglect of evangelical vision coexist with a general perception of risk and danger. Even worse: where religious dimension is marginalized, or when Christian faith ceases to be a source of inspiration and truth in secularized societies, the thought that everything can still thrive quite well becomes an increasingly soothing illusion. Indeed, many symptoms suggest that such marginalization can have serious consequences, and it is unclear how to replace the source of inspiration, hope and grace religious faith used to provide in deeply secularized societies.

My comments try to deepen that perspective: a fruitful interaction between Christian faith and society in today's world is necessary to correct abuses and to offer a constructive and appropriate perspective to restore broken balances and priorities neglected in the dynamics associated with current progress. Progress less and less accompanied by faith becomes problematic when we look towards current limits and threats.

After some insight into the main issues arising from the most recent Catholic document, my aim is to expose possible criticism against this new Church concern and therefore to offer answers and reflections to help enforce and strengthen the published positions, beyond a naive or uncritical perception; this means to go into the current debates and to become involved in the public discussion as a recognized interlocutor.

1. Some basic issues in *Laudato si'*: Integral Ecology and imbalances that threaten the global environment

Even if most quoted documents deserve close attention (and an interesting paper would involve analyzing their common issues and proposals) this is not my aim in this paper. I will proceed showing some basic points in the Catholic Encyclical *Laudato si'* (LS), since they could represent a mature stage in the Church's view of environmental problems. Furthermore, the document assumes a conscious ecumenical stance, and its projection tries to be universal, reaching all people of good will. To some extent, these points can be broadly shared by other Christian Churches, and they assume, in an extensive way, what has been probed in many documents in the Catholic Church and (other Churches) preceding the Encyclical.

The first basic idea in the Catholic Encyclical is that strong imbalances occur in what should be a reality in harmony and where various components keep alive a fruitful level of interaction and tension. The proposed key is a vision of reality integrated into a kind of large system in which the different elements are interconnected and in relative dependence. This vision introduces a “universe shaped by open and intercommunicating systems”, in which “we can discern countless forms of relationship and participation” (LS 79). It is a universe that forms multiple relationships that characterize ‘the variety of things’ (LS 86). Hence, a “universal communion” follows: “called into being by one Father, all of us are linked by unseen bonds and together form a kind of universal family” (LS 89); “Everything is interrelated” (LS 120). The fourth chapter develops this subject extensively, under the heading: “An integral ecology”.

The idea of a comprehensive ecology evokes known elements from the Christian tradition. The first inspiring element is the Franciscan thought, but not only. St. Francis of Assisi is undoubtedly the star of this Encyclical (beyond the title and introductory lines, he is quoted 12 times in all) but the Franciscan master San Bonaventure also deserves four references. The basic idea of the tradition inaugurated by the Saint of Assisi is the profound communion among all beings created by God; the perception of a deep bond that unites us to all creatures, to the point of being able to recognize them as sisters. There are also allusions to St. Thomas Aquinas, who is mentioned once in the text and twice in foot notes; in this case, we have the Christian thinker of harmony and order in the whole of reality, in which everything partakes of the divine creative grace. These are not topics from romantic spirituality, but a theme common to the entire Christian tradition, which now receives a more detailed and updated treatment. For Catholics, it is important to draw inspiration from the best of our shared tradition.

A systemic, comprehensive view of reality resounds like a more contemporary topic, on the basis of ecological science, as an understanding about an interdependent natural reality or a more fitting representation of all that assumes complex forms, although in relative order and stability. Pope Francis offers a wonderful synthesis between Christian tradition and scientifically informed modernity as the basis for his analysis and practical applications. He presents a great vision in which everything is integrated, without exceptions or exclusions. The declared intention is to precisely extend the ecosystem reach beyond the limits often imposed, to integrate aspects of social and human life that are often excluded for reasons of convenience. A comprehensive system, thus conceived, is not limited to a purely biological level, but includes historical, social and cultural dimensions without which it would become pointless to analyse planet Earth as a whole system.

The idea of an integrated ecosystem serves to avoid some pitfalls that are recorded in recent studies on the human person and society. The first is an excess of reductionism. The scientific way to observe reality cannot help but focus its analysis on partial aspects of the investigated phenomenon. The scientific method entails reducing variables as a necessary and important condition for scientific advance. However, that approach can nourish the illusion that once science manages to explain some basic processes, at physical, biological or neurological levels, everything will be explained. Faced with the most reductive tendencies, other scientific views aim to react – pointing to global models, complex systems and the necessary interaction between different levels and processes. For humans, it is assumed in recent years that they are the result of genetic, epigenetic, developmental and cultural factors². Similarly, it can be said that societies are the result of multiple factors intertwined throughout history, and humanity as a whole configures the most complex, plural and integrated system into a mix of relative stability, tensions and changes that we know, but also one which is very fragile and sensitive.

The second problem is more practical, and is related to skills and action models. Pope Francis is faithful to his own thought when he criticizes self-referential expressions and strategies (LS 204, 208) born from individualistic attitudes and approaches unable to recognize the network of dependencies and relationships in which we live and which profoundly determine our own identity and our behaviour. Integral ecology implies further consequences. By assuming economic and social dimensions (cultural) and those linked to everyday life, moral and justice dimensions are involved and need to be recognized (LS 49, 155 ff.) Such ethical issues run the risk of being marginalized in an ecological vision just descriptive of, or reduced to caring for, the natural environment. In fact, a principle that is repeated throughout the document is the essential inclusion of the poor and a commitment to justice within a comprehensive ecological sensitivity and, therefore, it assumes as one of its central tenets the attention to suffering populations (LS 49, 119, 139, 158). The document even attributes imbalances within a culture due to the difficulty to recognize “objective truths and sound principles other than the satisfaction of our own desires and immediate needs” (LS 123), which prevents a binding and motivating moral guidance.

The third element to consider in this presentation is the transcendent reference that is sensed when the prospect of an integral ecosystem is assumed, one that does not leave out anything and does not rule out anyone. In fact, the system

² E. Jablonka, M. Lamb, *Evolution in four dimensions: Genetic, epigenetic, behavioral, and symbolic variation in the history of life*, London 2005.

can be understood by reference to God: it is “open to God’s transcendence, within which it develops” (LS 79). Faith becomes the key that allows “meaning and beauty” to be understood and interpreted. Systems theory acquires in this teaching a new and unexpected quality to an unusual extent. This point is extremely important in the dialogue between faith and science: when the human eye is able to cover the widest possible reality and to integrate it into a relatively ordered set, then it is easier to open up to the divine dimension or to providence that renders the miracle of evolution and stability possible. It is not only an apologetic argument, although it also must be taken into account, it is an invitation to look at reality in a comprehensive and inclusive way, able to grasp meanings that escape detailed observation or lose sight before the whole of reality and its beauty. It calls for a very human experience before the vastness of a closely-related world and that invites us to take better care of those links

2. The question concerning technocratic mentality and its limits

The third chapter of the encyclical is entitled “The human roots of the ecological crisis”. Pope Francis devotes several paragraphs to analyzing science and technology in relation to the current crisis. An important part of this chapter – and not only – shows the appreciation that the Church’s magisteria bears for many technical achievements and scientific progress. We are far from maximalist attitudes of suspicion regarding any technology. I counted up to eight references to science and to the work of scientists; the document even encourages creativity in scientific and technical development (LS 132). Three times, the tone becomes more critical (LS 114, 199, 201). Overall evidence points to some excesses that may be at the root of the identified problems, again a result of imbalances, and n. 105 points to the main reason: “our immense technological development has not been accompanied by a development in human responsibility, values and conscience”. The question also refers to “a meagre awareness of its own limits” (LS 105) and shortcomings in the field of ethics or values capable of guiding the use of such an excessive power currently owned by humanity. The problem is not technology itself, but the fact that it has been taken “according to an undifferentiated and one-dimensional paradigm” (LS 106); in this thinking, progress is associated with the domination and manipulation of all, exploiting the Earth to its limits, to serve power groups and interests, contaminating politics and economics. This paradigm includes an exaggerated reliance on market mechanisms and extreme knowledge fragmentation, in the opposite direction to the model outlined in the previous point.

Romano Guardini is an important author in those paragraphs, who is quoted countless times throughout the Encyclical. Guardini surely drinks from the inspiring source of Heidegger, who composed the deepest criticism against modern confidence in technology³. This is a very central target in critical thinking throughout the twentieth century, which was also taken up by philosophers of the Frankfurt School, under the label “critique of instrumental reason”, an approach that also leaves a trace in the Encyclical (LS 210). Pope Francis is therefore attuned to a current of thought feeding suspicion and criticism through contemporary reflection, thereby showing Christian reflection to a modern sensitivity.

The problem is once again the lack of an overview, in which disciplines such as philosophy and social ethics (LS 110) are also integrated; perhaps theology could be part of the whole, as well. The worrying thing again is the partiality and reducing strategy applied to a world subject to manipulation and reduced to autonomous spheres, a trend also reflected in the division of knowledge and the displacement experienced by humanities on the hierarchy of knowledge. Here also, the world suffers from a lack of integral understanding and insight. It can be argued that the limits that emerge when reality is not viewed holistically are also projected in the field of knowledge and science, which becomes partial and unable to see the whole and tries to dominate and manipulate without taking into account other dimensions, other consequences.

The problem grows in the light of the objections expressed in the Encyclical, and invites us to determine the limits of scientific observation and technical applications, and whether to consider only the short term, i.e. the immediate gain, or whether we need to take into account longer terms; whether to concentrate on one aspect when addressing a problem, to better deal with it, or whether to take a broader and more complex picture. From our point of view, this issue has not been tackled by the most cited authors developing systems theory, who often appear as quite confident on the spontaneous functioning of natural and social systems and have neglected the role that could be played by reflective, ethical or normative and even theological, aspects⁴.

The idea developed in the Encyclical is clear about the pointed question: the partiality and absolutisation of a paradigm based on techno-scientific domination would be unable to address the perceived imbalances and threats posed to all of humanity. Again, knowledge integration, or a ‘cognitive ecology’, is necessary as a condition to meet these challenges.

³ M. Heidegger, *Identität und Differenz*, Pfullingen 1957.

⁴ N. Luhmann, *Soziale Systeme: Grundriss einer Allgemeinen Theorie*, Frankfurt a.M. 1984.

3. Problems with the proposed analysis and agenda

It is convenient to address the critical arguments or objections that the new Church program could raise, to better engage a fruitful dialogue and search for appropriate responses. In this way, an intellectual exercise of responsibility is intended to be performed, once faith accepts the dialogical role played by reason and assisting believers in deepening their own insights. In that sense, a more dialectical program is followed in the wake of medieval scholastic theology, with its pattern built on thesis and objections to the thesis, which then pointed to tailored answers aimed at advancing the arguments and proposed solutions to problems. I also point to a more apologetic approach in theology, taking into account criticisms and objections to faith and Church proposals, in order to provide reasoned answers, instead of a theology which is closed in itself and unable to give answers to the many questions that arise in its cultural context concerning the faith we proclaim.

Here is a list of questions that need to be addressed:

Issues concerning the differentiation and contrast between economics, politics and the religious sphere.

Problems regarding the function and scope of the sub-system of religion in advanced societies.

Problems regarding the possibility of inserting an ethical dimension in economics and politics.

Ideological issues concerning Christian cultural and political identity.

Suspensions concerning the moral authority of Church leaders.

3.1. Issues concerning the differentiation and contrast between economics, politics, and the religious sphere

One of the most significant problems when trying to determine the scope of religion in advanced societies regards its real capacity to influence social areas that are no longer under its umbrella, as could happen in the past, but they are 'differentiated' or separated to carry out their functions in an independent and specialized way. This happened, for example, to economy, science and politics. They are highly specialized social sub-systems that operate according to a logic of their own, or 'private', and avoiding interference with other social systems: economics is responsible for the management of material goods, aimed at their growth and better distribution, but it should not care too much about other social systems, except for the consequences that such interactions could entail for its optimal functioning.

In fact, there was a big shift from traditional societies, where the religious sphere or, in our case, the Church, which held the function for steering or control over the entire society and its sub-systems, and modern societies in which these systems become slowly detached, and they lose ecclesial tutelage. Churches have felt how their functions become more restricted to their own religious system and limited regarding other social spheres, to whom at most they perform a certain service or ‘diakonia’, but churches cannot expect to stabilize the economy, to regulate politics or to improve science. We must consider that this development has been positive in the sense that such autonomy has meant a considerable progress and has brought benefits to everybody; the general situation is indeed better than the pre-modern age.

In addition, there is another factor to take into account: social evolution, as described by theorists of society, such as Max Weber and Niklas Luhmann, which implies an odd development: certain sub-systems are progressing and growing in their influence – the economy, politics and science – while others, such as religion and family, remain behind and are even losing positions⁵. The consequence deriving from this process is evident: that religious weakening is expressed in terms of ‘secularization’ or loss of personal and social influence by religious institutions, which are increasingly confined within their own field and must give up their big claims to exercise some leadership at any level other than that which is specifically religious.

Max Weber’s analysis at the beginning of the twentieth century shows the difficulties that a so-called ‘brotherhood ethics religion’ suffers in an environment where economic and political rationality prevail, assuming a rather impersonal dimension, to follow a profit and power logic. Such a dynamic entails an inevitable shift in religious expression to the point of rendering St. Francis unimaginable in a context dominated by the new economic mindset⁶.

Another case is offered by the scathing criticism that Niklas Luhmann addresses attempts by ecclesial and theological circles to engage in environmental causes; in his own words:

Theologians are included in the discussions involved with environmental problems too. Their motives and interests are not viewed with suspicion. They demonstrate argumentative competence and are undeniably of good will. But their contributions to the ecological discussion remain inadequate. To a great extent, they merely repeat what is thought and proposed without the specific religious reference. What they have to offer are mostly commonplaces that do not raise the real problems. They are usually concealed in concrete pictures, words, admo-

⁵ N. Luhmann, *Function der Religion*, Frankfurt a.M. 1977, pp. 255 ff.

⁶ M. Weber, *Zwischenbetrachtung*, in: *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*, Tübingen 1920, p. 571.

nitions and appeals. After all, they propose not to take technology, science and economic relations as the sole prevailing vehicles of domination. Instead they believe that the later ought to be auxiliary in the formation of a human culture inside the natural condition. Such things are better left unsaid. They are inadequate and of not greater help if theologically reformulated by invoking God⁷.

For the German sociologist theologian's, effort is redundant and superfluous, in that it does not add anything to such a difficult and complex challenge, involving more social systems. At most, the churches could assume a protest attitude, which does not contribute much to solving real problems.

If we take stock of these developments, it becomes almost illusory that a Christian program would intervene in very complex political, economic and social issues, when they have been for a long time entrusted to each social subsystem with their own logic, with their own resources, communication codes and corrective measures. The Church's social teaching would become in such case only a testimony, a voice that expresses its own opinion and concern, but with little capacity to change things or even to re-orient them for good.

3.2. Problems of the function and scope of the subsystem of religion in advanced societies

In connection with the problems just outlined, the analysis on the function of religion in advanced and secular societies seems to discourage any claims to go beyond what has been assigned as its contribution and mission. There have been several attempts to come to terms with such a function, from a more practical level – providing cohesion, moral motivation and purpose – up to a more abstract level, as in the case of the theories that link religion to “de-paradoxalisation of the paradoxes arising from the self-referential nature of social systems” (Luhmann). In any case, religion's central role today probably has to do with keeping alive transcendence communication, i.e. with the possibility that we can continue to meaningfully talk about a transcendental realm, and then to call upon God, to pray, to expect for a life after death, to recall the soul or to speak about sin and salvation in an absolute sense, or about good and evil in the most radical and total sense. This not just a ‘language’, but a social building communication.

The question that comes out when trying to broaden ‘Church services’ beyond that narrow or specific program, becomes quite disconcerting, especially in secularization times. Christian faith has always been not just ‘religion’ but it has also offered other ‘services’, like care services, education and therapy. However,

⁷ N. Luhmann, *Ecological Communication*, Chicago 1989, p. 94.

in the context of advanced societies, some limitations arise. The first has to do with the development of social services – administered by the State – covering many social areas in a very efficient manner: health care, education, unemployment and other unfortunate contingencies. It seems that this practice tends to widen and that other areas can be called up within the protective umbrella provided by the so-called ‘Welfare State’, as is the case with the protection of vulnerable populations, against abuse or concerning new and minority rights. In this context, the Church remains a bit displaced and deprived from other functions formerly assumed and endowing social relevance.

A second problem has to do with the most appropriate strategies in a secularized environment or much less religious culture. Some sociologists have observed that Christian Churches, in several cases, have tried to compensate for their loss of cultural significance through alternative activities which place the emphasis on tasks and issues that may perhaps be more appreciated by those who are not particularly religious. In other words, since religion is no longer in fashion, many churches may seek social consensus by endorsing social, ethical causes and political or environmental programs that could impart some relevance to their own institution. The problem is that – following such a strategy – it is likely to accelerate the pace of secularization or implement a trend already perceived as eroding for religious faith. As the American sociologist Mark Chaves claims, an institution which is equally civil and religious – such as a Christian school – will very likely undergo a displacement in its religious dimension, by the secular one, among other reasons, because the civil authority is more easy to follow, or less demanding⁸. Such tendency requires from religious institutions a steady enforcement to support the specific religious activities and internal culture.

Many sociologists, from Peter L. Berger onwards, have reported this process as a form of ‘internal secularization’, namely, that which is triggered not by the negative influence of a culture that ostracizes the religious dimension, but for internal dynamics pushing to assimilate patterns, ways of thinking and priorities that are strictly secular, or which do not need a reference to transcendence to be assumed and implemented⁹. For instance, the causes of justice, peace and ecological commitment can be carried on without any religious connection, as simple ethical issues largely shared by the majority of the population.

⁸ M. Chaves, *Intra-organizational Power and Internal Secularization in Protestant Denominations*, „American Journal of Sociology” 99 (1993), p. 1-48; *Denominations as Dual Structures. An Organizational Analysis*, N.J. Demerath III – P. Dobkin Hall – T. Schmitt – R.H. Williams (eds.), *Sacred Companies: Organizational Aspects of Religion and Religious Aspects of Organization*, New York 1998, p. 175–194.

⁹ P.L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*, New York 1967.

The described arguments point to an orientation that is urging the Church back to its basic tasks, and to leave aside other activities and concerns, to avoid dispersion of what seems to be essential and central, namely, all that helps to keep alive the flame of transcendence, or what is more specifically religious. In this context, some discouragement regarding ethical or social causes could be justified, because it would be less the Church's job, and they do not rank among the most burning priorities for institutions that rather struggle to survive in many advanced societies.

3.3. Problems of inserting an ethical dimension in economy and politics

A different difficulty has little to do with the Church or religious systems, but with the specific traits assumed by autonomous systems such as economics and politics. To put it briefly and concisely, these systems follow their own logic that has little to do with ethical criteria. In fact, the logic that presides over the economic system is profit or gain, and rightly so, while that over the political system is the achievement and maintenance of power, and could not be otherwise. As a consequence, the ethical dimension plays only a merely derivative or functional role regarding the primary scope of those systems.

Some examples may help to understand this point. In the economic field, ethical issues fall under an 'economic format'; that is to say, it becomes important to behave in a more respectful way towards minority rights or a company workers, or to respect the environment, only if such attitudes help to earn more, at least in the mid-term, and they would be less interesting if such attitudes do not help to earn anything, or if they entail losses. The last criterion – in that context or from that perspective – can only be functional to the interests of the system, and cannot be otherwise if what we do is economics, and not voluntary social work or philanthropy.

The same criteria works for politics, another social system where ethical issues are very peripheral, but up to a certain point. A politician behaves ethically if his/her behaviour helps to gain votes and support, and brings more power and social influence, or reputation, otherwise it would not make much sense to behave 'more morally', if it means losing votes and power, if it prevents raising sufficient funds to finance advertising campaigns that can promote your own profile.

If these are the conditions with which we are dealing within economics and politics, then moral appeals may have little impact, even less than attempts tried by churches, except when such attempts result in material or symbolic capital gains or provide business people and politicians greater prestige and, therefore, more customers or votes.

There are too many examples and cases which show the inadequacy of Christian criteria – much less Franciscan ones – such as mercy, forgiveness and compassion, for business or financial management. Abject failures are usually associated with attempts to organize a more ‘fraternal economy’ or production system. Other styles, with a very different logic, dominate in those areas, and proposals from ‘Social gospel’ and similar traditional and new insights often fall into wishful thinking.

So everything points to the conviction that the Church is not in a position to give advice on how to manage the economy or the political sphere. Churches should then focus on carrying their own duties in their own area or social field and to avoid interfering with other realities that require a lot of expertise and professionalism. In the same way that politicians or economists shy away from advising Church authorities on how to manage Christian communities or which doctrines to change, in the same way economists and politicians expect minimal interference.

3.4. Ideological issues concerning Christian cultural and political identity

For a long time, and in different countries, Catholic populations were accustomed to taking sides rather toward the centre-right, and to avoid a left or liberal-progressive leaning. There are reasons that concern both ancient and more recent culture wars, which led to endorsing some political parties and avoiding others. Catholicism was accustomed to place itself in conflict, first with liberalism, and later with communism, and thus with the broad leftist spectrum. In more recent times, the centrality attributed to issues like beginning-of-life and end-of-life, and the family’s defence, justified new ideological separating lines and partisan boundaries, and even a talk about ‘red lines’ or non-negotiable issues that would prevent any tendency towards the left.

However, the positions taken by Pope Francis in his writings focusing on social and environmental issues, the ‘solidarity’ language, and a harsh criticism of the market system, and other similar points appear as more akin to the leftist cultural and ideological framework, in tune with ‘Liberation theology’. Many wonder if we can still speak about a common Catholic – or by the same token Lutheran – political or ideological tendency broadly shared by Church members. Even evangelicals have experienced similar struggles in recent years.

In the case of Catholic culture – and I suspect Lutherans are not very different – its sensitivity and expressions are more attuned with tradition against innovation, or stability against revolution or radical changes. It is not easy within a tradition that entails an identifiable ‘cultural identity’ to re-orient things and

establish new priorities. In Catholicism, traditional and renewed devotion still holds as an expression of faith; in such a context it is difficult to import a template, or rather a style, that points to alternative issues, worries and Christian concerns. A difficult question arises concerning which cultural model or Catholic style can better withstand the current times, or adapt to a secular context without losing its own identity and, above all, to stem the secularizing tide.

A rather different difficulty within the Catholic and Protestant worlds concerns theology, research and study inspired by faith. The general impression is that theologians have largely failed to develop a capacity for dialogue, specialization or familiarity with social sciences, particularly economics and hard science, which has rendered it difficult and even impossible to conduct a fruitful dialogue. Often the impression arises that there are two different languages, without any possibility to meet or exchange. On the theological side, many times claims have been made about aspects of reality that were not well-known and situations whose complexity did not allow for easy solutions and, in any case, required much more study and analysis. In such cases, our colleagues in social and natural sciences concluded that theologians could not be taken seriously, simply because they did not understand anything about the scientific approach and their objects of study and, therefore, scientists felt that it was not worth wasting their time with theologians.

Such rather negative experiences and generally a perceived theological and ecclesial aversion to social and biological sciences have often prevented an approach which was more than necessary and which blocked a more nuanced and careful reading of the signs of the time, with no easy simplifications.

3.5. Suspicions concerning Church leaders' moral authority

The Catholic Church – more than other Christian Denominations – has suffered a considerable attrition in its image and social impact in the last 15 years after sharp criticism on account of its failure to deal with sexual and financial abuses. The moral authority that should be the main capital of Church leaders has suffered immensely after that wave, showing a state of institutional failure that discourages any trust towards them. The problems that arose in recent years have shown an intrinsic weakness in Church structure and its difficulty in managing its own misdeeds and wrong-doings.

Even if pervading corruption internal to the Catholic and other Churches has little to do with environmental challenges, the derived discredit deeply affects Pastors' credibility and threatens to render their voice quite irrelevant. The view is that Churches that do not manage their own problems well, will hardly be able to address greater, world level issues, like those linked to climate change.

4. What answers for the issues raised?

Among the many objections compiled from our list about the Church's ability and opportunity to intervene in economic, political and environmental issues, perhaps the most pressing questions are those arising from a perceived inability or lack of qualification for such a task, because of the internal logic presiding over these very specialized systems and the confusion of faith regarding the development of contemporary economy and science. This is where we should focus our discussion.

To start with, the exposed criticisms may highlight the shortcomings that afflict Churches and theologians who are incompetent in their duties, but do not point to a total exclusion of religious faith and institutions before pressing global issues involving many dimensions. The fact that invites reflection is that these tasks must be carried out in the best possible way, with expertise, skill and deep knowledge about the concerned reality, in dialogue with the sciences, and avoiding *a priori* arguments and speculation that are of little use, but entering in the ongoing debates and interacting from an area in which we are experts. Indeed, pastors and theologians alike are experts on humanity, on suffering, salvation and hope; and from such expertise we can contribute to highlight issues of global concern.

The central question on social differentiation and limits imposed when trying to interact with highly specialized social systems needs to be addressed from a different perspective. Advanced societies do not evolve only through achieving greater differentiation, but also through greater synergy, collaboration and coordination between different systems. This point has been emphasized – among others – by the sociologist Manuel Castells, who indicates how examples of great development are the result of converging political action, scientific research and economic investment, and that only within such interdependence will some successful achievements be explained¹⁰. It seems reasonable to think that economic isolation from science, or both regarding policy, is harmful and dysfunctional in advanced societies. The big question for us now is how we must integrate faith or the operating system that keeps alive religious communication with other social systems that can be jealous of their autonomy. One answer is that the function of religion is not restricted to nourishing a personal experience of transcendence, but it provides as one of its services discernment and denounce, to suggest corrections to social systems that appear unable in the long run to conduct self-correction and to deal with their own limits, despite their partial successful results or achieved progress.

¹⁰ M. Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society: The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*, London 1996.

Concerning economic and political systems, limitations become more and more obvious that once were seen as minor, when an optimistic view was convinced that everything could be fixed by themselves. Through a greater social awareness and a more critical and better informed culture, limits and risks in these areas become more evident and, at the same time, the feeling grows that these systems are unable to correct the most negative trends observed today. Political corruption, for instance, is a well-known case without boundaries; still worse appear the disasters linked to the complex financial system, once seen as very sophisticated and capable to manage every crisis. Recent studies have highlighted the serious and regrettable inequality problems associated with the capitalist economy. The voices of very authoritative economists like Thomas Piketty, Joseph Stiglitz and Anthony Atkinson¹¹ suggest another limit inherent to the economic system that does not rely too much on the economic system to heal itself. We cannot even wait until politicians or scientists manage to fix some problems that will surely require an effort at multiple levels and an intervention able also to change a dominant culture or value system that justifies selfishness and consumer exploitation based on the logic of gain.

The described limitations perhaps become even more obvious when the ecological question is targeted; the insufficiency of just economic or political solutions is more than apparent. If you want to change an entire system of values and a culture, then religion becomes one of the most important factors and one necessary, or more able, to influence values and cultural frameworks.

Probably the major question raised in this paper concerns the best way to understand how our world develops and behaves as a differentiated and, nevertheless, integrated society. This question emerges because systems theory provides a good heuristic tool in order to better understand what is going on, to 'analyse' social spheres with their own logic. However, the normative side remains excluded and possible dangers and global threats remain hidden to this wider vision. Something could be missed when humanity, structured in the way it currently is, appears unable to address one of its greatest and most pressing challenges: climate change and the best way to preserve our natural habitat. Here, an integral view, as proposed in Church documents, could supplement the theoretical framework that now appears deeply flawed when the current deficits are accounted for.

Other objections concern the role played by the churches and the risks of internal secularization that may lurk through social or ethical commitment, when the priority of faith is missing. In our case, the answer is very simple: the

¹¹ Th. Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, Cambridge 2014; J.E. Stiglitz, *The Price of Inequality: How Today's Divided Society Endangers our Future*, New York 2013; A. Atkinson, *Inequality: What Can Be Done?*, Cambridge 2015.

best way to cope with social and ecological crises is to avoid neglecting faith or flattening it to support a more ethically-driven mindset; on the contrary – our only hope of improving things lies in the possibility that faith will keep alive, and continue to nourish, both our hope and that of new generations. From here, however, a caveat needs to be made: Christian Churches can deliver their diaconate in the social field and environmental awareness if they do a good job of keeping the flame of faith in a transcendent and loving God burning, not when they neglect their own duties in order to better promote social and environmental causes or engage in ethical causes because religious activities are no longer appreciated or valued by the dominant secular culture. Church engagement to stop the wave of secularization is their best contribution to environmental awareness.

Finally, a note on different theological styles. At least since the publication Richard Niebuhr's book, *Christ and Culture* (1951), we have been aware of the plurality of theological models and styles available for Christians when dealing with world affairs. As many remember, he describes five 'types'. As a consequence, any program wanting to reduce faith to a unique style, be it world contrast, or assimilation to it, becomes futile and inadequate to Christian history and theology. Niebuhr's fifth model is Christ as a cultural transformer, i.e. an understanding of faith in Christ able to transform society and to bring it closer to the ideal represented by the Kingdom of God. This model, however, requires a large investment of forces and must be carried with skill, and not only with innocence and voluntarism. This is where pastors and theologians need to do more to apply in a concrete way and on the basis of study and reflection directives emerging from the Church's official teachings, in constant observance of modern conditions. This task calls for a greater commitment and interdisciplinary study on the current conditions and how faith can contribute to the general good, while maintaining a religious profile.

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Troska Kościoła dotycząca problemów środowiska: rozumienie nowej diakonii chrześcijańskiej

Streszczenie: W ostatnich latach pojawiało się wiele wypowiedzi Kościołów chrześcijańskich, które miały na celu rozwiązanie problemów związanych z ochroną środowiska. Niewątpliwie jedną z ostatnich była katolicka encyklika *Laudato si'*. Dokumenty te zachęcają do zaangażowania teologicznego, zwłaszcza gdy przedstawiona tu problematyka podlega osądom krytycznym różnych środowisk społecznych i intelektualnych. W niniejszym tekście starano się ukazać, jakie jest źródło tej krytyki i zrekapitulować powody, które mogą zniechęcać Kościół do zaangażowania na rzecz środowiska. Niewątpliwie rozeznanie tych kwestii jest podstawą do trwającej dyskusji i poszukiwań odpowiedzi na najpilniejsze pytania duszpasterskie.

Słowa kluczowe: diakonia chrześcijańska, encyklika *Laudato si'*, Kościoły chrześcijańskie, zaangażowanie na rzecz środowiska.

