

Press release

Environmentalists driven by idealism, not apocalyptic thinking

Political scientist: 50 years after the publication of the Club of Rome’s “Limits to Growth”, the principle of hope is still dominant in the environmental movement – Groups such as “Last Generation” and their blockades are also shaped by ideals – Religious environmentalists ready for fundamental changes – “Religion is not only green” – Podcast episode 10

Münster, 24 February 2022 (exc) Principle of hope: according to researchers, the commitment of the European environmental movement is, despite the almost hopeless environmental situation, still inspired largely by idealism, 50 years after the Club of Rome published “The Limits to Growth”. “Groups such as ‘Last Generation’ and their blockades are also shaped by ideals, even when they point to apocalyptic scenarios”, says political scientist Doris Fuchs from the Cluster of Excellence “Religion and Politics” at the University of Münster and spokesperson of the Centre for Interdisciplinary Sustainability Research (ZIN). “The Club of Rome’s book was already based on the principle of hope; the hope that politics and the general public could be motivated to embrace change towards sustainability. Even after decades of largely futile appeals, the movement still has idealistic motives. We can therefore expect new and more drastic forms of protest, but the majority of the movement will refrain from radicalization in the sense of an ‘eco-terrorism’”, according to Fuchs, whose research focuses on the role of non-state actors, especially of religious organizations, in environmental governance. Religious actors are also gaining influence in environmental policy at UN and EU level. Religious and non-religious environmentalists are not in normative conflict here over worldviews, with both often drawing their motivation from both scientific information and closeness to nature.

“Religious actors also make a specific contribution: because of their deeply rooted values, many are prepared to demand a fundamental change in society”, says Fuchs. The idea of the immaterial basis of a fulfilled life is one of their core messages. Through this idea, they also recall more frugal ways of life of their grandparents’ and great-grandparents’ generation, and can enrich the approaches of groups like ‘Fridays for Future’ and ‘Extinction Rebellion’”. In a similar manner, the notion of responsibility for God’s creation thrives on faith and action. “The recourse to religious traditions and ideas strengthens the innovative demands for a sustainable lifestyle”, Fuchs explains. “However, religion does not automatically mean environmental awareness, as the example of evangelical climate deniers shows”. Fuchs made her comments in the context of the Cluster of Excellence’s annual theme, “Tradition(s)”, which focuses on the emergence and reinterpretation of traditions. In the podcast, she talks about her research on the limits to growth and religion, and economic growth as ideology.

Religious representatives often speak with one voice and mobilize a broad group of people for transformation

According to Fuchs, a central motive for religious actors from Christianity or Islam is the idea of loving one’s neighbour, which they understand as a mandate for justice with regard to future generations and the global South. “The papal encyclical ‘Laudato si’ on the depletion of natural resources and the ‘Islamic declaration on global climate change’, both published before the

Paris Climate Summit of 2015, contributed to a much stronger mobilization of people in communities and at the political level”, Fuchs explains.

Commitment has increased particularly in Islam: “Many people directly affected by climate change live in dominantly Islamic regions such as North Africa and the Middle East. Muslim associations working on environmental issues such as HIMA have emerged in Germany, and the Abrahamic Forum organizes religious nature conservation days”. Besides Christians, other religious representatives are becoming increasingly influential in the environmental discourse of the European Union (EU) and the climate and sustainability summits of the United Nations. “They draw on common values: Hindus, Catholics, and Muslims perceive God in nature, and see nature as God’s work”. This gives religion a unifying role in environmental policy, one that also reaches actors without religious ties.

“By addressing people in a faith-based way, religious representatives can also reach people who would otherwise not feel addressed by environmental activists”, says Fuchs: “Their hopeful approach helps them reach many believers worldwide”. In doing so, religious actors can lay a foundation for broad and long-term engagement. “A societal transformation needs deeply rooted values that motivate people to undergo a fundamental change in personal lifestyle and societal values”, Fuchs stresses. “To this end, religions make a specific contribution”.

“Religion is not only green”

The growth of religious influence in environmental policy should not conceal contrary attitudes, however: “Just as many climate deniers come from the evangelical spectrum, and the concept of the prosperity gospel has a strong presence in Latin America, for example. Growth and prosperity are seen here as a sign of God’s grace, and not as an environmental threat”, Fuchs explains. “Religious positions on sustainability draw on different traditions: the religious tradition of preserving creation can foster a sustainability orientation, as does responsibility for one’s (future) neighbours, while the notion of human dominion over nature can be used to justify the further overconsumption of resources”.

Doris Fuchs heads the project “Religion as a resource in European and international climate politics” at the Cluster of Excellence, and has recently published a study with political scientist Hannah Klinkenberg on faith-based contributions in EU climate policy. She argues for the expansion of discussions on environmental policy with religious representatives within the EU and the United Nations, as well as for a stronger presence in the media. “Fifty years ago we talked about the limits to growth; now we talk about the post-growth society. A combined engagement of religions can help to motivate a broad population to support the target of climate neutrality by 2050 set by EU climate policy and the Green Deal”. (apo/vvm)

Reference: Klinkenberg, Hannah; Fuchs, Doris. 2021. ‘Religion: A resource in European climate politics? An examination of faith-based contributions to the climate policy discourse in the EU’. *Zeitschrift für Religion, Gesellschaft und Politik* online. doi: 10.1007/s41682-021-00082-0.

Caption: Prof. Doris Fuchs, PhD (Photo: Martin Zaune)