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# A response to James Martin-Schramm

Philipp Pattberg<sup>1</sup>

## The ethics of disruptive change and the role of religion

Climate change represents a uniquely complex social justice challenge. Different from other cases of historical social (in)justice, climate change does not allow for an easy attribution of wrongdoing across time, space and class. Rather, ‘victims, wrongdoers, and beneficiaries are dispersed (but unequally so) among different communities and generations’.<sup>2</sup> The emerging ethical questions that lie at the core of climate change are as follows: How do we balance historic responsibilities with current capacities in an interconnected world of competition for market and resource access? How do we balance rights and responsibilities of current and future generations under high sociotechnical uncertainties? And how can we best distribute costs and benefits of climate-change action across societies, groups and individuals? It is due to this immense challenge and the importance of ethical scholarship on climate change that an ecological justice approach to the Paris Agreement and ongoing climate actions is much needed. In this short response to James Martin-Schramm, I argue that the Paris Agreement indeed falls short not only in terms of satisfying ethical guidelines but also in terms of effectiveness. As a consequence, urgent additional actions are needed to raise the ambition level to meet the 2°C target. In the context of the much-discussed non-state global action agenda – that is, the possible contributions of regions, cities, companies and civil society – I will focus on the ambiguous role of religious groups and individuals.

In 1992, when the international community agreed on the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the science of climate change was still developing, greenhouse gases were predominantly emitted by developed countries and the concentrations of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere had just surpassed 350 ppm. Some twenty-seven years later, climate change is scientifically uncontested, China has overtaken the United States as the world’s largest emitter of CO<sub>2</sub> and atmospheric

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<sup>2</sup> Lukas H. Meyer and Dominic Roser, ‘Climate Justice and Historical Emissions’, *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 13:1 (2010), 229–53.

concentrations are now measured above 410 ppm. Against this background, states have successfully concluded a new global agreement under the UNFCCC, the 2015 Paris Agreement.<sup>3</sup> Prior to the Paris Agreement, the climate regime focused on allocating emission reductions among (a group of) countries. The normative basis for allocating emission reduction requirements was the principle of common but differentiated responsibility, and it was interpreted as a clear distinction between North and South in terms of responsibilities for climate-change mitigation. The new agreement, however, has turned the climate regime on its feet by introducing a ‘pledge and review’ approach based on Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs). Under this approach, states decide their ambition levels independently instead of engaging in negotiations about ‘who does what’. The result is a more flexible system that for the first time includes all countries in the quest to reduce GHG emissions to keep temperature increase below 2°C compared to pre-industrial levels.

But while the Paris Agreement has been widely acknowledged as a breakthrough in climate diplomacy,<sup>4</sup> serious doubts remain about its ability to achieve the necessary fast transformation towards net zero emissions by 2050. We are not on track with regard to the necessary emissions reduction and political opposition, and climate denialism is mounting in a number of countries. Recent assessments of the effectiveness of the Paris Agreement have highlighted a number of challenges. Following Barrett,<sup>5</sup> analysts agree that a successful climate-change mitigation agreement must achieve three related goals:<sup>6</sup> broad participation of polluters, adequate levels of compliance and sufficient ambitions with regard to emissions reduction. While the Paris Agreement fulfils the participation criterion – as of 2019, the Paris Agreement has been signed by 197 parties and has been ratified by 184 with 181 submitted NDCs – it falls short on compliance and sufficient ambitions to reduce emissions. In the 2018 Emissions Gap Report by the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP 2018), the authors conclude that

current commitments expressed in the NDCs are inadequate to bridge the emissions gap in 2030. Technically, it is still possible to bridge the gap to ensure global warming stays well below 2°C and 1.5°C, but if NDC ambitions are not increased before 2030, exceeding the 1.5 degree goal can no longer be avoided.<sup>7</sup>

In fact, to meet the 1.5°C target, the current ambition level contained in the NDCs would have to be increased fivefold by 2030. Much expectation is currently set on non-state

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<sup>3</sup> Philipp Pattberg and Oscar Widerberg, ‘The Climate Change Regime’, *Oxford Research Encyclopedia* (2017), doi: 10.1093/acrefore/9780190228620.013.46.

<sup>4</sup> Radoslav Dimitrov et al., ‘Institutional and Environmental Effectiveness: Will the Paris Agreement Work?’ *WIREs Climate Change* (2019), doi: <https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.583>.

<sup>5</sup> Scott Barrett, ‘Climate Treaties and the Imperative of Enforcement’, *Oxford Review of Economic Policy* 24:2 (2008), 239–58.

<sup>6</sup> Dimitrov et al., ‘Institutional and Environmental Effectiveness’.

<sup>7</sup> UNEP, ‘The Emissions Gap Report’, United Nations Environment Programme, Nairobi (2018).

actors in bridging the ambition gap.<sup>8</sup> While some observers are cautiously optimistic about the potential of non-state actors to meaningfully contribute to climate-change mitigation,<sup>9</sup> others point to existing problems with accountability and transparency of non-state climate actions.<sup>10</sup>

In sum, evidence is accumulating that suggests that the Paris Agreement is falling short both in terms of justice and effectiveness. Consequently, disruptive change and transformative action are urgently required that need to gain speed and depth quickly over the next years. In the words of Martin-Schramm, ‘those who want to avert catastrophic climate change must also take responsibility and act in various ways to address the climate crisis’. This brings me to the urgent and somewhat under-researched question: what is the role of religion in the process of rapid and disruptive transformation? The role of religion, in particular the role of the Judeo-Christian tradition, in the environmental crisis has been scrutinized ever since Lynn White’s article of 1967.<sup>11</sup> Beyond the generic criticism, a more nuanced picture has emerged. This is not the space to review in detail the state of the art on religion and sustainability. However, I want to briefly mention a number of more recent studies that exemplify two fruitful questions to be asked in the context of the required transformation: In a situation of required rapid change, how useful is a Christian worldview? And, what strategic options exist for relating religious worldviews to sustainable behaviour?

Starting with the former question, a now classical attempt to replicate and broaden an earlier study on the relation between religious orientation and environmental concerns<sup>12</sup> finds that literal interpretations of the Bible, belief in God and Christian affiliations correlate negatively with environmental concerns (in this study, measured as favouring increased spending on the environment). Catholics are more likely to support spending than Protestants, but both groups are far less likely than non-believers or people who understand the Bible as a book of fables. An important implication of this line of research is that strategies to mobilize religious individuals and groups should vary. A more recent study by Koehrsen reveals that organized religion played a very minor role in the energy transition in the pioneering city of Emden, Germany. As Koehrsen states, ‘In a highly environmentally active region, there are few indications that religion has a

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<sup>8</sup> Sander Chan and Idil Boran et al., ‘Promises and Risks of Non-state Action in Climate and Sustainability Governance’, *WIREs Climate Change* (2018).

<sup>9</sup> Jale Tosun and Jonas Schoenefeld, ‘Collective Climate Action and Networked Climate Governance’, *WIREs Climate Change* 8:1 (2017), e440.

<sup>10</sup> Oscar Widerberg and Philipp Pattberg, ‘Accountability Challenges in the Transnational Regime Complex for Climate Change’, *Review of Policy Research* 34:1 (2017), 68–87.

<sup>11</sup> Philipp Pattberg, ‘Conquest, Domination and Control: Europe’s Mastery of Nature in Historic Perspective’, *Journal of Political Ecology* 14:1 (2007), 1–14.

<sup>12</sup> See Douglas Lee Eckberg and T. Jean Blocker, ‘Varieties of Religious Involvement in Environmental Concerns’, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 28 (1989), 509–17; Andrew Greeley, ‘Religion and Attitudes toward the Environment’, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 31:1 (1993), 19–28.

specific function.’<sup>13</sup> One may conclude that ongoing transitions are possible without the involvement of religious actors and that there is little empirical evidence to suggest that religion has played a major role on climate-change-related transitions to date. Finally, a recent study on opinions about climate change comparing Muslims, Christians and secular groups in the UK reveals that both Muslim and Christian groups have low perceptions of urgency for environmental issues due to beliefs in afterlife and divine intervention.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, scholars have pointed to the positive contribution that public theology can make to the climate-change crisis. Kjetil Fretheim argues that public theology can offer faith, hope and love by ‘speaking with an inclusive, probing voice, searching for shared ground, compromise and collaboration, but also the use of a prophetic, critical and transformational language integral to the Christian tradition’.<sup>15</sup>

With regard to the second question, research by Mikusinski and colleagues on biodiversity and religion shows that biodiversity relevant areas are concentrated in countries with larger Catholic populations. Furthermore, the authors conclude that ‘the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches appear to have the greatest per capita opportunity to influence discourses on biodiversity’.<sup>16</sup> This type of research opens up possibilities of developing conservation (and more general sustainable development) strategies by understanding religion as a source of influence in the governance of a particular environmental challenge.

To conclude, against the background of critical assessments of the Paris Agreement and related broader climate actions, Martin-Schramm’s ethical framework is very timely and useful. By developing middle axioms, based on the four fundamental norms of sustainability, sufficiency, participation and solidarity, Martin-Schramm successfully connects Christian norms to concrete policies (along the temporal, structural and procedural dimensions). The framework, based on Christian ecological justice, relates smoothly to broader debates about climate justice and thereby feeds into the emerging social justice movement around climate change.<sup>17</sup> What seems to be a relevant way forward when it comes to the ecological justice framework presented by Martin-Schramm is to use the framework for guiding the transformative process that lies ahead. For example, the necessary transformation of the global energy system will require ethical assessment and guidance in order to succeed. A Christian-inspired

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<sup>13</sup> Jens Koehrsen, ‘Does Religion Promote Environmental Sustainability? Exploring the Role of Religion in Local Energy Transitions’, *Social Compass* 62:3 (2015), 296–310 (306).

<sup>14</sup> Aimie L. B. Hope and Christopher R. Jones, ‘The Impact of Religious Faith on Attitudes to Environmental Issues and Carbon Capture and Storage (CCS) Technologies: A Mixed Method Study’, *Technology in Society* 38 (2014), 48–59 (48).

<sup>15</sup> Kjetil Fretheim, ‘Democracy and Climate Justice: Public Theology in the Anthropocene’, *International Journal of Public Theology* 12 (2018), 56–72 (72).

<sup>16</sup> Grzegorz Mikusinski, Hugh P. Possingham and Malgorzata Blicharska, ‘Biodiversity Priority Areas and Religions – a Global Analysis of Spatial Overlap’, *Oryx* 48:1 (2013), 17–22 (17).

<sup>17</sup> See Ashley Dawson, ‘Climate Justice: The Emerging Movement against Green Capitalism’, *South Atlantic Quarterly* 109:2 (2010), 313–38.

framework could provide important inputs into the broader multicultural and diverse debate about possible energy futures by enabling, in the words of Martin-Schramm, ‘ethical deliberations with a diverse group of conversation partners’. However, Christian theology can inspire frameworks for climate justice but is limited in its acceptance of urgency and agency. As the short critical reflections on the agency of religion show, to move from ethical assessments to transformative practices will require more careful analysis of the opportunities and limitations of religion in addressing the climate-change challenge.