

On Politics and Piety

Marta Gustavsson

What content should a Christian lifestyle have, in the age of global warming, environmental destruction, and increasing violence often due to global inequality and widespread exposure of the world's poor? Two years ago, my answer would have been very much oriented towards personal piety; abstaining meat and preferably dairies as well, living in ecological and ascetic simplicity, taking short and cold showers and biking wherever I was going. I was a pious, climate-friendly moralist, and probably enormously annoying to people around me.

Today my view has changed somewhat and I will let a story from Swedish politics illustrate this: Two politicians, one conservative and one from the Green Party met in the parking lot. "I didn't know you Greens were allowed to go by car", the conservative said ironically. "We are", said the Green. "But you are all about the climate issues, aren't you? How can you be this irresponsible and go by car to work?" "Differing from you" the Green politician said, "we do not believe people will change lifestyle by themselves. It is you who claim that individuals can take responsibility and stop the climate changes. So it is you who should take yours and bike."

These two poles of argumentation illustrate very well the split of self-understanding that has been debated in the Church ever since Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire. A church where all tradition and theology came from a minority perspective, all of a sudden had the world's power in their hands. Ethics and ecclesiology made for living beside the power (*in* the world but not *of* it) now had to engage very intimately with the same power. The little person's (Christian's) own ethical responsibility was exchanged for a powerful opportunity for the Church to order piety ('change of lifestyle') and to transform the society.

I have heard a lot of grief over this, over the forced and inconsistent insertion of violence to the Christian doctrine and how the Church opened up for the violent powers of this world. When talking about the climate, many Christians don't call for acts of 'human' power but instead for a classical 'wake-up movement' making the souls ready for all veganism and whatever might be needed for solving this issue. The motive for this is, I believe, that they want to be piously neat-and-nice not upsetting anyone. Often the sacrifice of these brothers and sisters is very large; they attain an ambitious eco-awareness just to proof the possibility of waking up to the new-born life of a zero ecological footprint. To be a fool for Christ might be a virtue to admire, but I sadly must say that these efforts tend to make people all the further away from waking up, and even from doing anything at all.

This is of course not a problem only concerning the Christian clique of the climate-friendly movement. I have met new-born environmentalists of several faith traditions and I can for surely tell that pious climate moralism is not solely a Christian phenomenon but when it occurs within a Christian interpretation it must be understood in quite a different way, which I will examine later. I, myself, would probably still be of this kind if I still believed that it would be the only way of coming to terms with global warming. Now I am, on the contrary,

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quite convinced that personal piety in this form is not a possible pattern (although not an unimportant feature) for the problem's solution at all; I will give three reasons for this.

First, global warming is a challenge demanding from the rich world acts that are too difficult, not to say impossible, to wish for oneself. The asceticism of climate-friendliness tends to fail to decrease the ecological footprint as much as necessary. The political act of forcing one to change their lifestyle must, for most of us, come from the outside, in the form of taxes, regulations and prohibitions. This cannot, I believe, be done in a way pleasing all or being voluntarily wished for by a large number of people. Still, it needs to be done.

Secondly, this failure of the personal piety tends to provoke a feeling of guilt that we, from a Christian perspective cannot accept as a theological end. If you are requested to do the impossible, swimming against the stream of the indecent (meat-eating, airplane-flying and so on) and with no results in sight; is this really in accordance with a merciful God? Is not the individual responsibility too heavy of a burden for one person to carry?

I want to make clear that I am the first to admit the demands that Christian faith poses. I agree that we from a missiological perspective (the Church reaching out to the poor and needy) have the responsibility to work for a better climate; so how? This leads me to my third point: The work of the individual Christian is always a participation in the work of the Church leading us from the perspective of personal piety to the communal acts of faith. This is also where piety has its place; as a driving force of the Church's work, and maybe as a sign that is collectively sent from the Church to the world showing what is actually achievable. The communal body that we form, as Saint Paul pointed out, consist of parts but for each part to work for the mission of the body, it has to admit the interdependence and belonging that connects it to the others.

This demands something of the Church that is difficult for big organisational bodies; to in unity request the power needed to take its responsibility. I may agree that the act of the 4th century to Christianize the empire and to add the acceptance for violence and power-abuse into doctrine is questionable. This does not, though, mean that Church must reject power in general. On the contrary, I believe that the pattern we see in the 4th century change can be positively interpreted for our present situation. I believe that the united Church, together with other good forces, could have the power to change the global political perspective so that the global community, instead of the responsible individual, makes the effort needed to make society sustainable.

If there is a pious and, in the eyes of this world, "foolish" work for Christians to undertake, maybe this is to stand up in political assemblies around the world demanding the impossible; the potentially painful transition to a just, equal and sustainable world.

Marta Gustavsson is a Master's student of Theology at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden. She is especially interested in the so called "wordly" aspects of theology; ethics, politics, economy, etc. and of the theological aspects of these fields. No matter what impression the article gives you, Marta is a vegetarian and biker, but not politically active.

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