

# HOW THEOLOGY CAN HELP SAVE THE WORLD FROM CLIMATE CHANGE

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## **What does the Bible say about climate change? What are the theological insights churches can offer to a world facing an unprecedented ecological crisis?**

These questions, addressed at a public seminar on "Creation and the climate crisis" attended by church representatives to the UN climate summit in Copenhagen on 15 December, seem even more urgent after the summit's failure to reach the fair, ambitious and legally binding agreement that millions around the world had hoped for.

"There is no evident relation between the gospel and climate change", said Jakob Wolf, head of the Department of Systematic Theology of the University of Copenhagen, which co-hosted the seminar with the National Council of Churches in Denmark.

However, to the extent that climate change is a consequence of human activity, it falls within the imperative of ethical principles, because human beings are responsible for their actions. The ethical demand to love one's neighbor applies here, as "planet Earth has become our neighbor", said Wolf, and one that is "vulnerable to human activity".

According to Wolf, a theological view of the planet and of the life in it as God's creation confers them an intrinsic value, therefore raising "respect and love". "The more we love life on Earth the more we are ready to act unselfish", Wolf said.

Here lies the contribution of Christian faith and theology to fighting climate change: a motivation that is comprehensive, deep and "much more vigorous" than if it were based on "cool calculations and cold-hearted duty". This is crucial, because humanity has "all the tools at hand" to take action on climate change. "It is only the will that lacks."

### ***Not apocalypse but hope***

Biblical scholar Barbara Rossing, professor at the Lutheran School of Theology of Chicago, United States, agreed with Wolf in that "the Bible does not say anything about climate change". But she believes Christians can base their response to climate change on the Bible.

Rossing's point of departure is the question: "Where is God in this crisis?" She rejects the notion that God is punishing humanity and rather sees God "lamenting with the world".

According to her reading of the Book of Revelation, "God is mourning on behalf of the earth rather than cursing it". The famous plagues are not predictions, but threats and warnings, wake-up calls, projections in the future of the logical consequences of human actions if their course remains unchanged.

However, for Rossing, the Book of Revelation does not announce the end of the world, but the end of the Empire. So in spite of the current unsustainable patterns of consumption and carbon-based economy, Rossing finds in it a message of hope: "Disaster is not necessarily inevitable; there is still time to change."

This "vision of hope for today" is an essential contribution that Christian theology and faith can make to global efforts to address climate change.

### ***The ecumenical dimension of climate change***

"In a very threatening and very disturbing way, the climate crisis brings us together as one humanity, as one fellowship of believers, as one church", said Olav Fykse Tveit, general secretary-elect of the World Council of Churches (WCC).

"We are called to show a sign of what it means to be one humanity, of what it means that God loves the whole world", Tveit said. As churches come together to offer this sign, addressing climate change "is uniting us in a very special way: as churches, as believers".

The message that God loves the world and every creature on earth "has been the heart-beat of the ecumenical movement facing climate change", said Tveit, recalling the long history of WCC concern with ecological matters.

In an ecumenical perspective, the concern for creation has always been linked to the concern for justice and peace. "It is not a matter of saying this is a planet for some of us", said Tveit, "this is a planet for all of us".

This point was also stressed by Jesse Mugambi, from the University of Nairobi and a member of the WCC working group on climate change. "The world is a world in which we are all relatives, but somewhere along the line we decided [...] to treat each other as strangers", he said.

Mugambi explained that in Africa climate change is already causing both severe droughts on the one hand, and flooding on the other.. With the help of maps he showed that those parts of the continent rich in water and cultivable land are also the areas of greatest conflict. Such a conflict "has nothing to do with ethnicity, it has to do with resources."

For Mugambi, the role of Christian faith and religion in general – through its leaders, theologians and ethicists – is that of "bringing us back to the norms" that can contribute to address a challenge like climate change.

"We are not talking about 'helping' African countries", Mugambi said. "It is not a matter of 'help', but of survival for all of us."