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## Book Review

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Markus Vogt, *Prinzip Nachhaltigkeit: Ein Entwurf aus theologisch-ethischer Perspektive* (Munich: Oekom Verlag, 2009), 555 pp., €29.90 (pbk), ISBN: 978-3-86581-091-5.

'Sustainability is the social principle of the common good in the turmoil of modernity', declares Markus Vogt on page 466 of his hefty study, which offers us one of the best contemporary insights into the struggles of Catholic theological ethics in Germany and related countries and especially the challenges of environmental sustainability and justice. Five extensive chapters focus on the evolution of this discourse and its impacts upon Christian ethics (mainly in the Catholic sphere) through the last five decades.

The study painstakingly describes numerous contributions to the discourse in natural and social science, philosophy, and theology. While the themes from the natural sciences are international, the theological perspectives remain limited to the author's country. Chaos theory, complexity, open systems, co-evolution, and social movements like global solidarity networks are depicted as fostering a yearning for sustainability, or better in German: *Zukunftsfähigkeit* (future viability).

The author's diagnosis with regard to the Catholic Church is mercilessly lucid. As the world's largest unified religious community, it still has not learned its lesson about the importance of the environmental dimension in global and local politics and culture change. Vogt's prognosis is clear; the focus on sustainability quickly transitions into a multiplicity of public spheres and Catholic belief systems. His contribution clearly demands (following theologian W. Korff) that sustainability should be developed as one of the central 'social principles' of Christian ethics, along with the principles of personality (the dignity of the individual person), solidarity (humans are inherently social creatures, and interdependence is their 'natural' state), and subsidiarity (the notion that decisions are best made at the most basic levels possible). Such a demand might sound abstract and idealistic, but for those familiar with Catholic ideologies and practices it is apparent that such a claim is not merely academic, but represents a strongly normative, politically volatile, and representatively ambitious perspective—albeit one humbly designated as a 'sketch' in the book's subtitle—that could radically push Catholics into the forefront of environmental politics and ecologically enlightened cultural practices.

This book, published by a trendsetting press in German environmental studies, has enabled the author to attain a professorship in theological ethics at one of the most prestigious theological faculties in Germany. This could in itself be evidence of the emergence of a new dynamic in the Catholic sphere in Europe and beyond. The study furthermore vitalizes intraconfessional Christian ecumenical exchanges and prepares Christians for interreligious adventures where environmental orthopraxis must venture 'beyond dialogue' (echoing John Cobb).

One could debate Vogt's conscious decision to avoid naturalist and ecocentric approaches, but his decision leads to an innovative exploration of the complementary interpenetration of a human-centred ethics of social principles within environmental discourse and simultaneously, the potential contribution of an environmental discourse within the 'nature' of Christian ethics. His project is praiseworthy for revealing nascent potentialities within the Catholic tradition of moral philosophy, which can no longer simply address the collision of humanity and nature as peripheral to its mission.

One could argue that the author, in his focus on the human person, marginalizes spiritual traditions which regard the creation as a gift with an intrinsic value, a perspective that, if clothed in spiritual and aesthetic values, might balance the ordinary anthropocentric focus on nature as a resource. But such a discussion would not do justice to his commitment to explore a path which goes beyond human identity and bodily life. As the old debate between anthropocentric and ecocentric approaches loses steam, it should be clear by now that both approaches have merit and should be mined as deeply as possible. Our future emphasis should be on cross-pollination of fruit-bearing trees from both gardens. Markus Vogt's study delivers many such fruits from the Catholic tradition, even if he lamentably draws only selectively from other theological traditions. This reviewer also found his approach too limited to the modern-traditional Catholic separation of systematic and ethical theology, which hinders a deep flow of ideas between worldviews and ethical systems.

One of the most exciting reflections in this study is the deep interwovenness of the commitment to the poverty *and* suffering of nature. In many different contexts the author makes clear that anti-poverty struggles as well as global solidarity work must include the environmental dimension at its centre and that global justice and sustainability only can walk forward hand in hand. His constructive suggestion makes clear that social ethics must produce a deep integration of both movements in its conceptual architecture. This insight is not new; it has been present for more than two decades in political and social movements. But more ominous is the failure truly to integrate such a perspective into the dominant ethical framework which normatively influences the construction of long-term policies for global change. The December 2010 disaster in Copenhagen, where the United Nations made no progress on addressing climate change, has made this gap painfully obvious for all. Vogt highlights the awkward asymmetry and discontinuity between the need to protect common goods such as water, air, and climate, for example, and the incapacity to include such needs in revised ethical standards for decision-making. His demand to include sustainability as a central social principle for Catholic ethics in particular and Christian and environmental ethics in general would be a radical move forward. If this radical idea could be connected to the struggle for the liberation of (and with) the poor it might breathe new life into the Christian ecumenical scene and related national discourses. Vogt's vision of theology and philosophy is as discourse partners contributing self-critical perspectives to the global environmental movement and transdisciplinary environmental science. This offers an approach that generates constructive perspectives for a global movement in an effort to increase its counterbalancing power against a life-destroying and dysfunctional world economy.

A final word of warning is in order; this study is written in the German academic genre of 'qualifying' the author for a professoriate. As food for thought, there is much nutritional value, but it is dense and heavy fare, difficult for the uninitiated

reader to digest. The book possesses enormously rich descriptions, detailed discussions of ethical pros and cons, and acerbic attempts to do justice to all conversation partners. These features should delight academics worldwide, but they should only be savoured in small portions by others. An abridged English edition would attract a UK/US publisher and fill a void in our understanding of current trends in Christian Europe (especially Catholicism). Germany has been on the forefront of the green movement for a generation, and the European Union understands itself as the main locomotive of global ecological change. It can be celebrated as evidence for the broadening ecological dynamics in Germany and also as evidence that the Catholic Church—which has contributed to Western moral identity since the medieval times—has started its green engines. Markus Vogt's book offers a significant sign of hope that these spiritual and moral engines will not stop any time soon, but will most likely continue to accelerate.

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