



BRILL

Book Review



Markus Vogt, *Christliche Umweltethik: Grundlagen und zentrale Herausforderungen*. [Christian Environmental Ethics: Foundations and Central Challenges]. Freiburg: Herder, 2021. (HB) 782 pps. € 48.00. ISBN: 978-3-451-39110-1.

Markus Vogt, professor of social ethics at the Catholic Faculty in Munich, belongs to the most influential and productive ethicists in Germany. The significance of his contributions to environmental ethics in general and to Catholic social ethics in particular is not limited to scholarly discussions but offers rich impacts also on the spheres of national environmental politics, civil society, and churches. His earlier work on the principle of sustainability from 2009 (reviewed in the *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 6.2, 2012) represents a classic study in the German discourse.

Christian Environmental Ethics offers the author's "magnum opus," summarizing a long time of investigating and enriching the field of environmental ethics and the potentials of ecotheological contributions. One can approach and read the copious book with its 22 elaborated chapters in different ways. Either as a kind of compendium mapping the most significant themes of environmentalism, environmental geo- and national politics, and (philosophical) environmental ethics, or as a thought-provoking in-depth discussion of the wide range of environmentally urgent conflicts and perspectives. Upon this one can also read the work as an exploration of what religion in general and especially the Christian tradition contributes, through theology and ethics as well as through practices of the churches. One should definitively not interpret the book's title as if this heavy piece offers "only" a specific theological contribution. Instead it provides us with a wide-ranging insight into the multifaceted scope of the most relevant and urgent themes of environmental ethics in general. It offers, upon this, a manifold of significant theological reflections on these themes. The author's meticulousness appears hereby as almost uncanny as he manages to handle an enormous complexity and diversity of voices, perspectives, and historical processes in the demandingly widespread discourse

about how humans should interact with nature. In this way one can also read the work as an impressive chronicle of contemporary environmental history and its driving worldviews and ideologies in the West.

The book is divided in four parts (foundational issues, theological and ecclesial approaches, ethical-systematical approaches, selected practical fields). 22 chapters structure the diversity of the multi-layered discourse. The role of religion and faith, the crisis's multi-dimensionality, the significance of the anthropocene, and the search for meaning beyond beliefs in progress and growth constitute the first part. Creation theology as environmentally contextualized rethinking of religion, the Catholic Church's late engagement, Pope Francis' *Laudato si'*, and ecotheology's interreligious and ecumenical perspectives offer in the second part rich and detailed insights into the present state of ecotheology in dialogue with science and society today. In the third part the author carves his own position subtly examining philosophers, scientists, and theologians. Vogt positions his work beyond naturalism in a sophisticated relation of empiricism and ethics (nevertheless continuing along the classical tradition of natural law). Different forms of reasons for environmental ethics are analyzed, and the author argues for an ecological enlightenment of anthropocentrism and for a deepened interconnectedness as a foundational principle for environmental ethics. Vogt lands in a plea for understanding the human as, with Wolfgang Welsch, *homo mundanus* (world-bound human) and an ecological expansion of the human rights. The interconnection of poverty eradication and climate change is highlighted in a brilliant chapter on climate justice and on the justice of sharing resources. In a specific chapter on intergenerational justice Vogt unfolds his most creative contribution by suggesting a "theology of time," where rhythms, resonances, and processes of de-acceleration open a horizon of hope beyond the optimism of progress. Another central theme is identified in the concept of resilience as a promising and constructive strategy for the much needed "Great Transformation." In a sharp analysis Vogt clarifies how different understandings of resilience can be connected to the concept of (deep) sustainability and how they make sense at depth for environmental ethics. The themes of animal ethics and sustainability are discussed in special chapters, and in spite of tough criticism the author defends the concept of sustainability and develops its significance as foundation for a new social contract and a central term for belief in creation. The book's fourth and final part delineates some selected action fields, not at all arbitrarily but well-chosen with regard to ongoing debates. SDGs and the Paris contract, postcolonialism and the German energy turn, bio-economics and green genetic engineering are all explored on a high analytical level and with an impressive wealth of detail. The challenging discussion of population growth, also in urban contexts, is reflected

constructively and the important but notoriously difficult field of consumer ethics is deepened exemplarily. Finally chapter 22 offers one of the fields that Vogt regards as most relevant for our common future: “education for a sustainable development in the demand of Christian humanism.” In a creative way, inspired by Alfred North Whitehead’s “active ideas,” the author develops the UNESCO’s program for sustainable education with the skills of ethics, where also the bodily experiencing of nature, life and landscape is done justice. In this way the overwhelmingly rich work opens in the end our pedagogical imagination of another world, peacefully habitable for humans and all other created life forms.

Despite of all undoubted qualities of the work I would also like to point out some critical issues. Even if Vogt discusses explicitly the “endless” debate on anthropocentrism, he is not satisfyingly doing justice to the bio- or ecocentric approach. One would have desired an attempt to think through how far one might come with an ecocentric environmental ethic, and a more reasonable discussion with its advocates. Representatives of deep ecology and post- and transhumanism are all too quickly briefed. The author elaborates how very far one can develop an ethic that does not question the unique and special position of the human in God’s good creation, and I do not feel any need to criticize his normative conclusions, founded in a concept of “anthroporelationalism.” But by neglecting an increasing ecocentric mode of environmental thinking he tends to marginalize other spiritually important deep driving forces for shouldering environmental responsibility. The ethics of responsibility is central for Vogt, and it can definitively emerge also within a widened anthropocentric humanism in deep connection with all life, but it can without doubt also be fueled by neo-animist and aesthetically based forms of environmental commitment. For the role of religions in environmental ethics such an “aesth/ethic” perspective, where intrinsic values are shared both by humans and other life forms, seems to be highly relevant in my view.

Another point can be raised with regard to discourse ethics. Vogt’s text is exemplarily written to include and do justice to many relevant voices in the extremely complex field of environmental problems. It is an outstanding example for practicing leading principles of discourse ethics, especially in its emphasis for the option of the poor. Nevertheless discourse ethics as a central theory for political ethics is playing a marginal role in the author’s theoretical elaborations. Environmental ethics operates without doubt constantly in a demanding loaded political sphere. Therefore also the contributions of discourse ethics to a fruitful construction of theoretical and practical discourses about the interrelation between humans, society, culture, and nature, could throw valuable light on the many themes of the book. The question to what extent discourse ethics

and theological ethics can enrich each other is still rather in its beginning. Vogt draws often on the central work of Konrad Ott and Christof Hardmeier in this regard (reviewed in *Worldviews* 20.3, 2016). Maybe the extensive work of German environmental ethicist Ott who develops environmental ethics on the grounds of discourse ethics can explain the rather low profile of in Vogt's approach. Nevertheless I would have appreciated a constructive discussion on how Vogt's conceptualization relates to discourse ethics.

Given the richness, complexity and comprehensive presentation and discussion of the most relevant themes and voices in contemporary environmental ethics (not limited to Germany but in some dialogue also with English speaking thinkers) Vogt offers a unique work incomparable with any other study of this size and aspiration. In spite of its scope, the English edition in preparation will do much good to the international discourse and academy. Its text is by no means easily digested but offers nutritious food for a *zukunftsfähig* (fit for the future) and sustainable life at and with earth, our home.

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