This book by Markus Vogt, currently holding the chair of social ethics at Munich University, is a landmark publication: By theologically and ethically reflecting on sustainability it interlinks theology of creation, fundamental ethics and applied ethics; it conducts a dialogue between theology and science; and it develops concrete, ethically justified strategies of action for some of the most pressing political challenges of our time.

In the first section Vogt gives a detailed introduction to both question and method of his study. Here already central keywords are found: The first subsection describes the need to establish sustainability as a new social principle. The following two subsections, “The ‘signs of the times’ as a theological and ethical challenge” and an examination of the Church’s possibilities of developing her ethical competence amidst a pluralistic society are among the best that has been published on these topics for a long time. Shaped by Vogt's decades of experience in various important ecclesiastic advisory bodies, they should be considered required reading for both professionals and volunteers active at the interface between society, politics and the church.

The second section first describes in detail the conceptual history of ‘sustainability’ as a morally relevant principle; it then illustrates both its initial infiltration into and its subsequent increasing importance on the church’s discourses on environmental and development issues. Framed by these historical ascerements Vogt develops seven so-called ‘ethical policy cores’ of sustainability, including the notion of ‘environmental capital’ and its debate about ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ sustainability, the implications of ‘social sustainability’, and – due to rejecting the traditional three-pillar concept – the attempt to define sustainability as ‘cross-sectional task’.

Thus, the field is prepared for the book’s following two core sections: on sustainability’s ecological dimension – drafted as a discussion between theology of creation and science (section 3); and on the socio-economic dimension of sustainability with its main focus on intergenerational and global justice (section 4). Section 3 gives an account of the multiple concepts of nature having featured prominently during the last four decades’ discourse on sustainability, it deals with different understandings of ecology – oscillating between science and a doctrine of salvation –, it comments on the relationship between evolution and creation, and it analyses in how far some of the radical changes in conceptualising nature in science (inter alia quantum physics and chaos theory) influence the sustainability debate. Section 4 focuses on dilemma and criteria of intergenerational and global justice, and is thus both a solid summary and ethical evaluation of current debates about environmental and development policy; it is not by chance that its central ideas – though formulated less technically – can also be found in a position paper on climate change (2006) by the German Bishops' Conference.

In the concluding section Vogt resumes his earlier argument for establishing sustainability – in addition to personality, solidarity and subsidiarity – as a fourth social principle both in social ethics and in the church's social teaching.

This is a weighty book in every sense. The individual sections of the study can equally be read consecutively or individually. As a theologian, philosopher, politically arguing intellectual and experienced practitioner, Vogt addresses both his church ad intra and secular science, society and politics ad extra. For all these different potential recipients studying this book – due to its concentrated reasoning and dense prose – is by no means a simple, but at all times rewarding endeavour.

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