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CHRISTIAN ETHICS AT THE TWO-DEGREE TIPPING POINT

How can the needs of today's generation be satisfied while simultaneously not unjustly restricting the developmental prospects for future generations? That is the core question of all deliberations that can be aggregated under the collective concept of "Sustainability". Catholic theologian Professor Markus Vogt is convinced that problems such as climate change can only be translated into practical principles of behavior in close dialog between the natural sciences and social sciences. In particular, he sees a need for churches to undertake key ethical initiatives in politics and society.

Just two degrees Celsius makes all the difference. If the increase in the mean global temperature stays below this value, there is hope for the planet. But if the earth heats up more than this, the prospects for drastic climate changes loom – such as thawing of the permafrost soil or melting of ice packs in the Antarctic, which until just recently were considered "eternal ice". Even with relatively low temperature rises, the climate system could reach so-called "tipping points" causing abrupt and drastic changes. Although the natural sciences cannot determine these limits precisely, the two-degree value is used as a guideline in the international climate debate: 109 of the total of 192 signatory nations of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change have committed themselves to the goal of not allowing global warming to exceed two degrees. However, recent analyses reflect skepticism about the prospects for attaining this goal, e.g. the "Synthesis Report", which an international research team published in early 2009 on behalf of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) of the United Nations. According to this report, the concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere today is high enough to trigger global warming of two to 2.4 degrees Celsius.

Closely related to studies on the magnitude of climate change is the question of how it can at least be slowed down. And this has led to the introduction of a concept that has run the course of a rapid career in recent years: Sustainability. What is meant is a preventive social, economical and environmental development that satisfies the needs of today's generation

while simultaneously preserving prospects for future generations, so that they can satisfy their own needs and make lifestyle choices freely. This is nothing less than a generational contract which guarantees that people worldwide will have an environmental system that is as intact as possible in the future, thereby preserving the foundations of life.

AN EFFORT FOR SUSTAINABILITY

So much for noble thoughts. International politics has been experiencing difficulties converting sustainability into concrete principles of action. “The crucial ethical-political challenge is to take fragmented and short-view interests and to refocus them on the long-term goal of worldwide cooperation for preventive climate protection,” explains Professor Markus Vogt, holding the Chair of Christian Social Ethics at LMU Munich. He argues that churches should make their voices heard in the debate on sustainability: He is convinced that “Sustainability goes right to the foundations of an ethical orientation and defines the relationship between people, nature, and culture, which due to its comprehensive character also inevitably includes a religious dimension.” The theologian formulates what can be brought to the sustainability debate, as a specifically Christian component, in his book *Prinzip Nachhaltigkeit. Ein Entwurf aus theologisch-ethischer Perspektive (The Sustainability Principle. A Blueprint from an Ethical-Theological Perspective)*. In this book he attempts to set forth a view of sustainability, not exclusively from a naturalistic perspective, but in the context of socio-culturally embedded concepts of justice and well-being. His approach is not to oppose technology, rather to seek technical innovations that benefit resource preservation, not to overcome striving for affluence and free markets but to establish an economic-societal market economy that pursues a kind of well-being that is satisfied with lower consumption of resources. “We must reflect more intensely on the biological and socio-cultural conditions of our self-awareness as moral entities and safeguard these conditions in the form of eco-social imperatives,” says Markus Vogt.

Here the church itself runs the course of a learning process as a participant in search of answers to environmental challenges: “The church is currently driving into the sustainability dialog with its parking brake set,” says the theologian. His recommendation is to free up this parking brake and view sustainability as the “missing link” between faith in Creation and social environmental discourse. “Just as the Christian idea of Caritas was understood for centuries to refer only to the ethics of virtue and only evolved into a political force in conjunction with the solidarity principle, faith in Creation is said to be in need of interpretation in structural-ethical categories to attain political and legal force and clarify the specific consequences of organizational structures and economic decisions.” He sees the current sustainability discourse as still too far removed from a uniform societal concept that would enable the founding of a new viable societal contract. That is precisely why churches in particular are challenged: “The churches and the entire society must learn to show more vigor, become more political.” Politics is not a system that can control everything – that was demonstrated by the drama at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Devel-

► Gustofer Church in front of the brown coal fired power station Frimmersdorf.



opment held in 1992 in Rio de Janeiro, which was largely made up of non-governmental organizations (NGO). At the 2002 conference in Johannesburg, the NGOs were confined to the other side of the city and had hardly any influence on the results. The conference results were weak, according to Markus Vogt. Time was in short supply, and the new global climate change agreement (post-Kyoto agreement) is expected to come into effect in 2012. The participants were not even able to agree on a uniform justice model. “For the new world climate agreement, we would still have to negotiate just what is to be understood as justice from a global perspective. We really should have presented viable models in December 2009, at the conference in Copenhagen. Instead, there are still completely different approaches.”

IN DIALOG WITH THE NATURAL SCIENCES

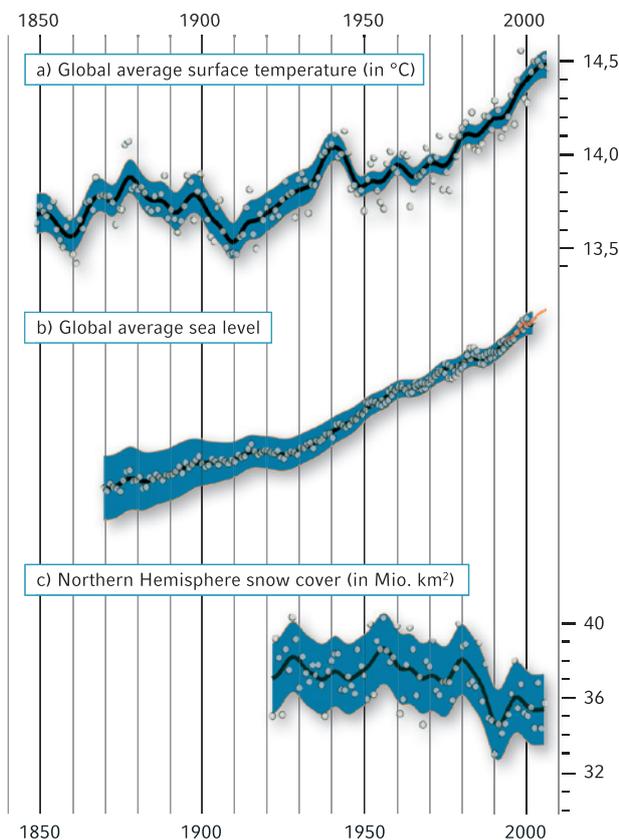
What can the church do to ensure that preventive thinking becomes a permanent fixture in economic and political decisions? Sustainability, as it was politically conceived, could easily spill over into ideology, says the theologian. “In politics, all sorts of things are promised, however it essentially justifies existing conditions. Religion’s role of ideological critique attempts to extend the horizon and consistently think in terms of the weakest, to bring the flip side of globalization into perspective.” He does not delude himself here: Christian access is no replacement for natural and social scientific rationalities. “Sustainability must assume a form that is socially, economically and environmentally sensible,” says Markus Vogt, emphasizing that a social and just society can only be established in dialog with the natural sciences. Yet, he sees the social sciences as having been underrepresented in this necessary societal discourse. In his opinion, the religious contribution toward establishing sustainability has been insufficiently communicated so far. For example, he suggests that the Christian view of justice, with its consideration of the poor, could help establish the claim to sustainability and formulate a global action strategy that includes third-world countries in particular. At the same time, the Christian proclamation of the kingdom of God should serve to shift the focal point toward responsibility for the future. Faith is founded on the existential awareness that humans are subject to certain set limitations. The experience of the limits of nature is said to offer a person the opportunity to “find new awareness of one’s

own limits as a creature that is not self-sufficient in life and cannot preserve itself permanently." Accordingly, only when a person joins a supportive and collective whole is it possible for the person to have a fulfilling and meaningful life. Over the long term, economic success should be measured by how people integrate themselves in the overall economy of creation, which at the same time expresses itself as a human economy. Finally, Markus Vogt sees in the Christian ethos of solidarity an important motivation for acting on behalf of global justice and worldwide partnerships. "Sustainability requires areas of lived solidarity, for which the globally networked, locally rooted and enduringly created structure of the church, as the largest and oldest world community, is an important source of inspiration."

CREATION FAITH WITHOUT SUSTAINABILITY IS POLITICALLY BLIND
 Injecting Christian perspectives into the public discourse of sustainable development is one of Markus Vogt's tasks. On the other hand, he wants to reinforce environmental consciousness within the church. He suggests that for far too long the needs of nature and those of people have been played off against one another, even in church circles. He notes that the Christian ethic was frequently viewed by environmental activists as part of the problem,

since in its fixation on the needs of humans it lost sight of nature, and even harmed it. It is this point to which Markus Vogt devotes his efforts. He is convinced that creation faith without sustainability is politically blind, because it has no relationship to decision-making problems in the economy, society or politics. "This means that although we do indeed have a plentiful number of ethical imperatives, we do not apply them specifically to conflicts that we must decide." Therefore, his goal is to embed the principle of sustainability into Christian consciousness. He views sustainability as preventive action for the future, whose motivating hope is not optimism about progress, but the vision of a successful life within the limitations imposed by nature. Such a hope beyond optimism about progress can be found in Christian faith. "It is not based on the idea that everything is always getting better and people can create a perfect society, rather it is based on an existential awareness of the limitations of humans, who can then turn to healing and hope when they recognize the gift character of life and their reliance on community." In his book, Markus Vogt wants to explicitly fill a gap that he sees in theologically based, human-centered ethics. He suggests that

▼ The global average surface temperature since 1850 (top), the global average sea level since 1870 (middle), and the average northern hemisphere snow cover since 1920. Uncertainties of measurement evaluated by the IPCC are indicated by the blue intervals around the average values.



Catholic social ethics has so far lacked a fundamental way to address the environmental question, which is why he wants to integrate the theme of sustainability into the canon of Christian social-ethical principles. These social principles act as a type of “ethical grammar” for the structural layout of the societal order. “Its systematic place and function is to translate biblical imperatives into structural-ethical categories, which take the open dynamic of modern society and economy into account.” The Catholic church has long counted the three categories of personality, solidarity and subsidiarity among its social principles. Personality signifies the recognition of the worth of a person as an individual, from which – among other things – the principles of the constitutional state follow. Solidarity is the expression of the anthropological concept of the person as a social being, which yields the postulate of just and equal distribution. Finally, subsidiarity refers to the property of a person as a cultural being, which is why smaller units of social and cultural belongingness take precedence over larger organizational units. Markus Vogt now wants to establish sustainability as a fourth social principle, because “Sustainability is a necessary, modernity-sensitive advanced development of issues traditionally treated under the topic of the common good. Sustainability is the social principle of common good in the turmoil of modern times.” So this principle formulates the anthropological aspect of people’s relationship to nature, which today is the source of numerous conflicts of justice.

Will efforts to promote safeguarded and sustained development by these Christian based conceptual approaches succeed? What is certain is that the time is short. Markus Vogt knows this too. When asked whether he believes that the ambitious two-degree goal will be achieved, he shakes his head and smiles: “But that does not mean that we should now fall back upon catastrophe and alarm scenarios. For theology, it is relatively normal not to attain goals; it has a lot of experience with contingency. We know that in our standards for a successful life, we cannot fulfill it ourselves, but we must always strive for it. The cross, failure and catastrophe are all part of life. Therefore, not everything is in vain and hopeless, rather there are always surprising new paths to take.”

Prof. Dr. Markus Vogt has held the Chair of Christian Social Ethics in the Catholic Faculty since 1 April 2007. His book *Prinzip Nachhaltigkeit. Ein Entwurf aus theologisch-ethischer Perspektive (The Sustainability Principle. A Blueprint from a Theological-Ethical Perspective)* was published in 2009.
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