

Christiana Z. Peppard and Andrea Vicini (eds.)

Just Sustainability: Technology, Ecology, and Resource Extraction. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015. 292 pps. (PB) \$42.00. ISBN: 978-1-62698-132-4.

Just Sustainability is a collection of 28 essays, introduced by Christiana Peppard and Andrea Vicini, and organized by topic (Part I: Locations, Part II: Structures, Part III: Theological Stances and Sustainable Relations). It is the third volume in a project initiated by James F. Keenan, SJ: Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church.

That the Catholic Church is a global player in the world church and beyond could hardly be more evident. It is not the numbers alone—16% of the world population. Of late it is the moral authority and charisma of Pope Francis and the impact of the encyclical, *Laudato Si': On Care for our Common Home*. That encyclical, too, is all about “just sustainability.” The point, however, is that the Peppard and Vicini collection, like the encyclical itself, takes full advantage of Catholic ethics in the world church as they now bear upon a planet in peril at human hands and as we all take up the grave challenge of effecting a viable and durable future.

Here is how it plays out that advantage.

The authors, while not Catholic in every case, are truly global. They hail from the Baltic States, Micronesia, Japan, India, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria, Brazil, Mexico, the United States, Kenya, South Africa, Chad, Australia, the United Kingdom, and Malawi. Their topics are equally global and highly contextual, essentially local case studies in sustainability, its impediments and possibility. The exceptions are broad framing essays, each explicitly part of a developing Catholic eco-theology and ethic. E.g., “Feminism and Ecology,” “A Catholic Virtues Ecology,” “Fostering Just Sustainability through Ignatian Spirituality,” “By Night in a Pillar of Fire: A Theological Analysis of Renewable Energy,” and “Humans and Other Creatures: Creation, Original Grace, and Original Sin.” The volume thus combines framing essays in Catholic moral theology and detailed descriptions of local realities.

The editors’ Introduction, “On Just Sustainability and Its Challenges,” is also a framing essay, albeit of a different sort. It introduces the volume as a whole, first posing the contested notion of “sustainability” and laying out the ways in which the essays—in Part I especially—hone sustainability with “a particular, thick set of descriptions” (3) from highly varied locales. Yet as a work in Catholic ethics, it also brings the norms of justice and sustainability to each essay, whether for guiding policy decisions or developing virtue. Sometimes the theological, moral, and policy discourse is front and center. This is commonly the case in Part II and Part III. Other times it is a hovering presence in the background, as in the heavily descriptive, case study accounts of Part I. All told,

the reader comes away with a textured presentation that is truly grounded, geographically and morally.

The editors' Introduction includes the standard overview common to most volumes of collected essays. Here, however, the overview is more helpful than many, in part because there are so many authors with such varied subjects that incoherence could easily be the impression left anyone scanning the Table of Contents and leafing through the pages. To order the diversity, the editors also introduce the authors and offer the gist of their essays, together with their rationale for clustering the essays into the three parts.

A certain modesty accompanies these pages. "This volume does not attempt to offer a final word on ecology, technology, and resource extraction. Instead, it illuminates some of the conceptual terrain from within a particularly well-developed form of ethical discourse" (3). While such modesty—only some of the terrain and only a penultimate word—is in the first place, straight-up honesty, it can mask the significance of this work. We very much need what it provides: representatively global and thickly descriptive accounts of real world reality self-consciously treated *as moral landscapes*. All sustainability must be locally embedded to be sustainable; and if it is not *just*, it fails, from a moral point of view, the test of true sustainability.

Differently said, this work moves more authentically into an ethic of place than most discussions of sustainability. The book's modesty is thus a virtue, not because modesty is itself virtuous, but because the book does well what can only be done at present—dig in deeply, in place, and work from there for a moral outcome that present and future generations might inhabit. The present does not allow a final plan or outcome, nor a final word about them, even when global treaties are as indispensable as local undertakings. But there can be rooted joint efforts to think and work collectively, humbly, and in place, for a sustainable world. *Just Sustainability* is a fine contribution to that.

All this said, a further step might have been taken. Given these rich case studies, and given the ranging essays on Catholic moral theology in process, are there not conclusions about the ethics of just sustainability that emerge? That task would no doubt fall to the editors, and require a very close reading of the essays in relation to one another, but it would be the right bookend to their good introduction. It would also lead the reader into the volume in a way that enhances it further.

Larry Rasmussen

Reinhold Niebuhr Professor Emeritus of Social Ethics,
Union Theological Seminary, New York City

lras1939@gmail.com