

# The False Pretensions of the Catholic Social Doctrine—The Critique of the Catholic Austrian Sociologist August M. Knoll (1900–1963)

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## 1 August Maria Knoll—Life and Writings

In Austria the most prominent representatives of Catholic social thought were not bishops and clerics—as was the case in Germany—but laymen. The central figure was Carl von Vogelsang (1818–1890), a Prussian aristocrat converted to Catholicism, who came to Vienna to work as journalist and editor of a periodical which became an important voice in political debates during the last decades of the Habsburg monarchy. He played a dual role: at the theoretical level as founder of the Catholic social doctrine, at the political level as mentor of Christian social movement which took shape under Karl Lueger’s leadership in the 1880s. Vogelsang’s expectation that his radical programme for solution of the Social Question would be accepted as basis of the official social doctrine of the Church was not fulfilled by the encyclical *Rerum novarum*. For August M. Knoll, who considered himself as the master’s follower, this was “Vogelsang’s tragedy” which resulted from his misunderstanding of the true mission of the Church with respect to the social and economic order.

August Maria Knoll was born in Vienna on September 5, 1900, into a family of a school teacher. He studied at the University of Vienna, from which he received his Dr. rer. pol. (doctorate in state sciences) in 1924, for his thesis “Karl Vogelsang und der Ständegedanke”. As a student he joined the Catholic fraternity “Nibelungia Wien”. After finishing his studies Knoll worked as private tutor and journalist. In 1932 he became private secretary of prelate Ignaz Seipel (Catholic priest, Austrian Federal Chancellor 1922/24, 1926/29, died 1932). He wrote his habilitation thesis “Der Zins in der Scholastik” under Othmar Spann. From 1934 to 1938 he was a Privatdozent (unpaid lecturer) at the University of Vienna.

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In 1932 Knoll published his first book on Catholic social doctrine “Der soziale Gedanke im modernen Kapitalismus”. The programmes of the Church and of Catholic organizations for a solution of the Social Question are discussed in the context of the emergence of the Social Question and other current approaches to its solution, e.g. Marxist socialism and German socialism of the chair (“Kathedersozialismus”). The book describes the evolution of Catholic social thought which led to the encyclical *Rerum novarum* in 1891. Its reception is documented by quotes from newspapers and periodicals. Although the encyclical *Quadragesimo anno* had been published in 1931, it is not subject of Knoll’s book.

As member and functionary of the Christian-social Party Knoll was appointed to politically important positions after the establishment of a fascist-authoritarian regime in 1934. He became administrator of the Vorwärts-Verlag, which had been expropriated from the Social-democratic Party, and was editor in chief of two newspapers. After Austria’s occupation by Nazi Germany in 1938 Knoll lost his positions at the publishing house. He was banned from his teaching position at the university and drafted for military service.

Knoll returned to Vienna in 1945. 1946 he was appointed to extra-ordinary professor, 1950 to ordinary professor of sociology at the University of Vienna. He is co-founder of the “Institut für Sozialpolitik und Sozialreform” (today Dr. Karl Kummer-Institut für Sozialreform, Wirtschafts- und Sozialpolitik), established in 1953.

Through various publications in periodicals, most notably through his books “Katholische Kirche und scholastisches Naturrecht” (1962) and “Kirche und Zukunft” (1963) Knoll became a public figure as prominent representative of “left wing Catholicism” in Austria, together with the historian and philosopher Friedrich Heer and the psychiatrist and publicist Wilfried Daim. He died in 1963.

## **2 Knoll’s Book Der Soziale Gedanke im Modernen Katholizismus (1932) on the Relevance of the Encyclical Rerum Novarum**

Knoll’s basic position on the fundamental nature of a Catholic social doctrine rests on a principal distinction between the religious and moral sphere and the social sphere: “The Church solves the Social Question insofar as it is a religious and moral question, but not in as far as it is a question of sociology, of social technique, of organization of the economy”.<sup>1</sup> Hence, the Church does not have a mission with respect to arrangements of economic systems, methods of production and distribution, but rather in matters where violations of charity and social justice in a

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<sup>1</sup>“Die Kirche löst die soziale Frage, insofern diese eine religiöse und sittliche Frage ist, nicht aber, insofern sie eine Frage der Soziologie, der sozialen Technik, der Wirtschaftsorganisation ist”.

concrete society call for its intervention. The task of the Church consists in “watching over outrages against charity<sup>2</sup> and justice” (Knoll 1932, 9).

This implies that there exists no particular social order that can be identified with Christianity or the Church (14). From a Christian or Catholic viewpoint, a variety of different forms and programs of social order appear possible under the condition that they do not violate justice and charity. Since the Church itself does not aim at establishing a missionary earthly kingdom, it does not provide social categories for an ideal order (8).

Knoll supports his position by referring to two millennia of historical experience which demonstrated the compatibility of Christian faith with different social orders. He quotes St. Paul whose letter to the Ephesians indicates that Christian religion accepts slavery as institution of “ancient capitalism” which was the social order in the Roman empire: “Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters, ... Knowing that whatsoever good thing any man doeth, the same shall he receive of the Lord, ... and ye masters do the same things unto them” (Ad Ephesios VI 5) (21). In the same vein, the Church has accepted the feudal order of land tenure and the urban handicraft system of the Middle Ages, such different economic systems as mercantilism and industrialism, small businesses and large enterprises, even socialism if it associates labour and capital in legal entities such as cooperatives, communal and state enterprises (8).

The flexibility of the Catholic Church to adapt to different orders of economy and society is reflected in official statements of authorities. Knoll demonstrates this by reviewing papal decrees on the issue of usury/interest. The position of the Church on this question changed in parallel with the changing function of money in society. It denied the legitimacy of interest for money loans in the early Middle Ages when monetary exchange was rare and the natural economy was still dominant, whereas its propensity to accept interest as price for financing productive capital goods increased with the growth of the exchange economy (26). In the conflict between the Dominicans (hostile to interest) and Jesuits (friendly) the Pope was careful not to take either side. Starting from *Cum onus* of 1569, the papal bulls discarded “usury”, but at the same time not any kind of interest was qualified as usury, e.g. if the interest rate was modest (26ff).

With the rise of capitalism and socialism in the 19th century the debate about possible solutions of the Social Question intensified, within the Catholic Church as well as in other Christian confessions (see Sect. 3). If the encyclical *Rerum novarum* of 1891 was claimed by either side to give support to the Catholic-conservative or the Catholic-liberal orientation, in Knoll’s view this is an expression of misleading concepts of Catholic social doctrine. At the same time, *Rerum novarum* rejects the claim of either side to represent the social doctrine to be the only one consistent with Catholic theology, while it establishes “basic programmatic principles for (social) programs. By necessity an infinite variety of such

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<sup>2</sup>The term used by Knoll is “Liebe” by which he means “caritas”/charity.

Catholic social programmes can exist, taking into account the ever changing nature of social realities” (232).

As concerns substantial issues, *Rerum novarum* postulates a moral obligation of the state to intervene against exploitation and poverty, in order to rescue the working class from being doomed to a proletarian existence—in this respect the Church follows the critique of the conservative school of thought. At the same time, the betterment of the social position of workers should be achieved within the given system—*ecclesia vivit modo capitalistico*, as Knoll quotes his mentor Ignaz Seipel whose position was on the side of the liberal Catholics. In itself, the Catholic Church functions neither in a capitalistic nor in an anti-capitalistic mode, while it operates within a capitalist system (232). Socialism is rejected because the Church accepts man as an empirical being, and is therefore “sceptical towards all optimistic social ideals” (235). The encyclical advocates social peace instead of class struggle, compromise instead of social radicalism, mediation instead of strike (236).

If, in his book of 1932 Knoll is rather outspoken with respect to the limits of providing a religious foundation for a social programme, he appears rather hesitant to take sides either with Vogelsang’s radical anti-capitalistic or Seipel’s more liberal attitude, which appear both possible within these limits. We therefore proceed by discussing Knoll’s position in the current debate about Catholic social doctrine.

### 3 Knoll’s Position in the Debate About Catholic Social Doctrine Before 1938<sup>3</sup>

#### 3.1 *Conservative and Liberal Catholic Social Thought in Austria*

The first part of Knoll’s book of 1932 is a survey of the literature on the Social Question. He briefly summarizes the critique of capitalism and liberalism in the writings of German romanticist philosophers, French, English and German socialists and the German *Kathedersozialisten* (socialists of the chair), before he turns to Catholic social thought in the 19th century in Europe. The section also includes a survey of official documents of the Church dealing with the Social Question before the publication of *Rerum novarum*, and of measures of social legislation in Austria and in Germany.

In the Habsburg monarchy, political Catholicism and modern Catholic social thought emerged during the period of political and economic liberalism between 1867 and 1879.<sup>4</sup> At first Catholic politicians represented the class of the land-owning aristocracy, and were predominantly conservative, if not “reactionary” in their orientation. The conservative current gained strength when the phase of

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<sup>3</sup>On the evolution of Catholic social doctrine see also Diamant (1965).

<sup>4</sup>On political Catholicism in this period see Fuchs (1949, 43ff).

rapid economic expansion ended in the crash of 1873. The ensuing severe recession was followed by a long period of declining prices which was—somewhat misleadingly—called “Great Depression” which ended only in the 1890s.

Catholic social thought fought against these developments on three fronts: against the negative social consequences of the capitalist mode of production; against the tendency of secularization which was the consequence of both capitalism and liberalism; and also against the emerging movement of socialism. Catholic writers saw an urgent need for political reaction to the increasing momentum of the socialist movement by offering a Christian alternative to the atheistic materialism of the latter.

In this period a profound change of political Catholicism took place. Already in 1879, the liberal government had been replaced by a coalition called “Iron Ring” (“Eisernen Ring”) headed by Count Taaffe, which was composed of conservative Catholic groups of a variety of nationalities. Mainly as a consequence of reforms of electoral law through which franchise was granted to wider circles of the population, the votes of owners of small businesses and peasants became a major determinant of parliamentary elections. The representatives of those groups increasingly dominated the Catholic political movement which turned from a party of notables to the popular Christian-social party of Karl Lueger (mayor of Vienna from 1897 to 1910).

The central figure of Catholic social thought in Austria was Karl von Vogelsang, who came from a Protestant Prussian noble family. After converting to Catholicism in 1850, he worked as a journalist in Catholic Southern Germany, and finally settled in Austria in 1864. In 1875, he became editor of the Catholic newspaper *Das Vaterland* (fatherland), and of the monthly magazine *Österreichische Monatsschrift für Gesellschaftswissenschaft und Volkswirtschaft*. Vogelsang is the spiritual founder of the Christian-social movement in Austria, and thereby also of the variant of Austrian antisemitism associated with the person of Karl Lueger.

Vogelsang’s pronouncedly anti-liberal and anti-capitalist views<sup>5</sup> were—admittedly—in central aspects indebted to Marxist and Lassallean socialism, from which it sharply diverged with respect to the alternative social order which should replace capitalism. Influenced by the German romanticist social philosopher Adam Müller, Vogelsang’s model of an ideal Catholic society was medieval, when every man belonged to one of the big social groups (*Stand*) nobility, clerics, peasants, urban burghers. This model guaranteed the stability of a hierarchy of social groups based on god’s will and natural law, and social solidarity by assigning a safe place in society to all its members.

Vogelsang was not only opposed to the capitalist economic and social order. He was suspicious of fundamental civil rights and liberties such as freedom of speech and freedom of science, which had destroyed traditional social structures. Deprived of its previous solid foundations, the political system was now “freely floating in the air”, subjected to changes in majority opinion (Klopp 1894/1932, 240ff).

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<sup>5</sup>Vogelsang never published a book with a comprehensive version of his theoretical works. This was done by his son-in-law Wiar Klopp (1894/1932) who assembled and edited essential parts Vogelsang’s articles and pamphlets in systematic form.

With respect to the Social Question, Vogelsang proposed the organization of the economy in corporations, modelled after the medieval guilds. Hence, he discarded market competition and supported the craftsmen's movement (*Handwerkerbewegung*) which fought for revision of the liberal Small Business Act of 1859 (*Gewerbeordnung*) through which guilds had been abolished. For big industry, Vogelsang advocated the establishment of joint corporations of owners and workers to unite the two in the ownership of productive capital, and to pull the rug from the socialist agitation for class struggle. Like Marx, he wanted to abolish wage labour, but in opposition to socialism Vogelsang wanted all workers to participate in the ownership of the means of production, and thus receive a "just" compensation for their work. The state was assigned an essential role in the implementation of the corporatist structure of economy and society. Politically, Vogelsang's ideal was that of a social monarchy, a "social kingdom", similar to the teachings of Carl Rodbertus. The monarch is assigned the role to function as supreme head of all corporate units.

Vogelsang's book *Die materielle Lage des Arbeiterstandes in Österreich* (with Schneider 1884) had great influence on social legislation. After the dissolution of the monarchy, his ideas served as theoretical basis of anti-democratic political forces in the newly established Republic of Austria to replace parliamentary democracy with a "corporate state" (*Ständestaat*).

A liberal current in Catholic social thought had first emerged in France (Knoll 1932, 70f) in the wake of Frederic Bastiat's *Harmoniés economiques* (1850) which maintained that the common good was served by a society in which individuals could freely pursue their own interests. They used the term "solidarism" for the capitalist market economy in which the individual feels responsible for himself and for the whole society. In Germany,<sup>6</sup> the first representative of the liberal current was Georg Graf Hertling who advocated social policy measures against the abuses of capitalism, while capitalism as a system was to be maintained. A more radical version of liberal orientation is represented by Heinrich Pesch SJ (1854–1926) who developed his own version of solidarism. Liberal Catholic thinkers were basically anti-interventionist in their economic policy concepts, while recommending only moderate social policy measures, if they did not weaken the functioning of the market mechanism. They did not deny that the social conditions of the working classes needed improvement, which had to be brought about by appealing to the moral responsibility of the capitalists and the wealthy.

In Austria, the liberal orientation among in Catholic social thought gained strength only after Vogelsang's death (Diamant, 58ff). The main representative was Franz Schindler, professor of moral theology at the University of Vienna. Schindler was opposed to Vogelsang's sharply anti-capitalistic attitude. He argued that capitalism was not incompatible with Christianity. He recommended that poverty and other negative consequences of the system should be healed or ameliorated by social policy measures. Schindler was succeeded by Ignaz Seipel, whose thinking was firmly rooted in scholastic theology, but who nonetheless followed Schindler's

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<sup>6</sup>See also Frambach and Eissrich (2015, 78ff).

liberal-Catholic orientation. Seipel was minister of social affairs in the Habsburg monarchy's last government. He was the personal mentor of Knoll who served him as private secretary in the year before his death.

### 3.2 *Knoll Between the Two Currents*

It appears not an easy task to find out what are the consequences of Knoll's interpretation of the history of Catholic social doctrine and of *Rerum novarum*. If Knoll denied that the Church had a mission with respect to specific arrangements of economic and social systems, this was probably not easy to accept for the major part of the hierarchy, although he could claim support from several renowned theologians, e.g. Johannes Messner<sup>7</sup> in Austria, Heinrich Pesch in Germany. He did not hesitate to describe the opportunistic attitude of the Church with respect to social and economic issues over the course of many centuries, while interpreting this flexibility as higher wisdom and prudent restraint. He became much more critical in this respect later (see the next section).

Emotionally, and with respect to substantial issues of the Social Question, Knoll appears to have been closer to Vogelsang's orientation than to the liberal-Catholic social thinkers. For Knoll, Vogelsang is "the great awakener of the social ideal in Austria and in Germany" (Knoll 1932, 91), and he also approves of Vogelsang basic idea of repealing the difference between capital and labour (95). But Knoll also leaves no doubt that Vogelsang's claim that the medieval feudal system of society based on fundamental principles of "natural law" was the true representation of a Christian social order, is untenable (14).

Moreover, Vogelsang's Christian fundamentalism was not only an example of "false pretension of Catholic social doctrine". Knoll was also aware that even apart from such an untenable claim it was wholly unrealistic to change the economic and social order in such a radical way. Hence, he accepted Seipel's liberal position that the Church basically accepted the capitalist order. On the other hand, he praised *Rerum novarum* for having rejected the non-interventionist position of liberal solidarism by postulating a moral obligation of the state to intervene in order to correct the most outrageous abuses of capitalism (226) On the whole, Knoll appears to have been basically in agreement with *Rerum novarum*'s equidistance to both orientations of Catholic social thought. The encyclical had not decided in favour of one side, but it had set limits for either side (224).

Knoll somehow aimed at a synthesis between Vogelsang's radicalism and liberal realism. He thought that workers could be elevated from their proletarian status of non-ownership by means of general employee participation schemes which could be implemented by social policy legislation within the existing economy. Given that the Social-democratic party was sharply opposed to this idea, Knoll pinned his hopes on the concept of corporate state and on the Catholic labour movement.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup>See the quote from Messner in Knoll (1932, 13).

<sup>8</sup>On the Catholic labour movement in Austria see Pelinka (1972).

When the fascist government established the *Ständestaat* (corporate state) after having crashed the socialist uprising in February 1934, Knoll served the regime as administrator of the *Vorwärts-Verlag* and its newspapers which had been expropriated from the outlawed Social-democrats. Together with like-minded Catholic social thinkers (Ernst-Karl Winter, Josef Dobretsberger) he had to realize soon that the authoritarian governments of Chancellors Engelbert Dollfuß and Kurt Schuschnigg were not at all prepared to grant any autonomous scope of manoeuvre to the Catholic workers movement (*Katholische Arbeiterbewegung*) which had been put in charge of the institutions of labour. The Chamber of Labour and the newly formed trade union organization always remained subjected to strict political control of the authoritarian government. But Knoll remained loyal to the regime until its demise in 1938, defending the idea of corporatism even for some time after 1945 (Pelinka 1977).

### 3.3 *Knoll's Left Turn: Katholische Kirche und Scholastisches Naturrecht (1962)*

In his last book of 1962 Knoll took more or less the same position towards Catholic social doctrine: that scholastic natural law did not provide a basis for the Church to decide about concrete issues of social and economic order, and that its basic sentences such as *suum cuique* were devoid of content. Therefore, scholastic natural law is not a social program, but only a “minimal program to guard against excesses in the social sphere” (Knoll 1962, 24). Only individualistic natural law which is the product of Enlightenment can give guidance with respect to political and social questions (14). Only individualistic natural law can flesh out the concept of political and economic freedom which has no meaning for from a theological point of view.

What is new in Knoll's last book is the author's sharply critical position towards the misuse of scholastic natural law by the hierarchy as apology of existing social conditions by confirming their compatibility with natural law, and towards the clerical hierarchy for upholding false pretensions of Catholic social doctrine in order to hedge its social and political privileges.

By upholding the pretension of competence in political and social issues, the hierarchy has sanctified extremely unequal societies and suppressive political structures against oppositional movements, mostly standing on the side of the ruling class, or on the side of the wealthy, and thereby defended its own wealth and the benefits it provided to the clergy. There are many examples where the Church even justified outrageous abuses which offended the morals of the minimal social program. When the Church has condemned class struggle in the 19th century (and also in *Rerum novarum*), it was fully aware that it gave support to the wealthy against



the wretched (52). Only when social conditions had become untenable and public opinion or political power relationships had changed, was the Church prepared to adjust its social doctrine accordingly. Therefore, encyclicals always come late, mostly too late, which does not only apply to *Rerum novarum* but to *Quadragesimo anno* (1931) and to *Mater et magistra* (1961) as well. This also demonstrates that the Church does not have a social mission. Knoll even ridicules the hierarchy's claim for social competence when he predicted that the next social encyclical due in 1971 would equally praise private ownership, the welfare state, and also accept major elements of the Communist economic system (62–63)—always by referring to the same eternal principles of natural law.

For the individual, this means that Catholic men and women willingly had to accept his/her social rank. Knoll quotes the Swiss theologian Otto Karrer who even wrote that the proper attitude of Christian was “resignation” (81). By requesting social obedience from its believers, the Church also re-enforced and protected the interests of the clerical hierarchy vis á vis the laymen. To break through the false pretensions of the Church and its clergy, Knoll calls for a different conception of Christendom. Whereas, according to the official Catholic doctrine the order of the clergy is superior to the order of the laymen, giving the former the decisive voice not only in spiritual matters, but also in worldly matters, Knoll calls for a “dualism of the two orders, which are equal organs of the kingdom of God” (20). Intuitively speaking, not the circle, with the clergy as central point, is the true representation of Christianity, but the ellipsis with its two focal points, with the focus on the lay with respect to worldly issues (20).

In his contribution to the book *Kirche und Zukunft* of 1963 Knoll heavily criticized the entitlement of “integral Catholicism” to supreme authority not only in the sacral sphere, but also in the secular world, which had been renewed by Pope Pius X with his slogan “*Omnia instaurare in Christo*” (Daim et al. 1963, 74). If this claim was out of touch with reality, it was still upheld by the Church with respect to the Catholic lay movement to which it denied autonomy. Knoll opposed “integral Catholicism”, emphasizing the independence of the Catholic lay movement vis á vis the clerical hierarchy.

Knoll's claim for an equal position of Catholic lays with respect to questions of social and economic order had a strong “anti-clerical touch”,<sup>9</sup> of course not in the sense that he was against clergy in itself, but against the pretentious claim of the Church hierarchy to have the last word in the debate about Catholic social doctrine. It would appear as a logical consequence to call for an end of Papal social encyclicals. Why Knoll did not draw this conclusion remains an open question.

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<sup>9</sup>In an obituary written in 1964 Peter Diem wrote: “Knoll was an anti-clerical Catholic”—not in the sense that he was against clergy in itself, but against the pretentious claims of many clerics.

## 4 Concluding Remarks

In his last book Knoll speaks of „the tragedy of the Vogelsang School“ (Knoll 1962, 56–57). Its representatives’ belief that they were propagating the true social doctrine of the Church was not confirmed by *Rerum novarum*. But the Vogelsang School was equally misled by claiming the competence of the Church for approval for a social program of this kind. At the same time, Knoll was convinced that “the Vogelsang system had progressively gained relevance in view of the development of social policy legislation after 1945”. Moreover, he thought that there were indications for economic and social trends which pointed towards a “transformation of capitalism” (*Umbruch des Kapitalismus*), to which no objections were raised in the encyclical *Mater et magistra* of Pope John XXIII (58).

There is continuity of Knoll’s sympathy for essential elements of the social and economic programme of the Vogelsang School from his book of 1932 to *Katholische Kirche und scholastisches Naturrecht* thirty years later,<sup>10</sup> with the reservations against the false pretensions of Catholic social doctrine. During the 1930s Knoll also actively supported the idea of a Corporate State. This idea was approved of as a “middle way” between capitalism and socialism by Pope Pius XI by the encyclical *Quadragesimo anno*. In reality, this implied political support for anti-democratic, authoritarian fascism which had been established in Italy by Mussolini, who actively supported the anti-democratic endeavours of the Christian-social party in Austria. When fascist dictatorship was established in Austria after the uprising of the Social-democrats in 1934, Knoll served the authoritarian regime in important functions. Apparently he hoped for a more democratic version of corporatism with free elections in the representative bodies of the corporate constitution.

With its decidedly anti-clerical orientation, Knoll’s attack on the false pretensions of Scholastic natural law and his challenge of the clergy provoked heavy reactions from the hierarchy and in print media owned by the Church.<sup>11</sup> From the clerical side his criticism of official Catholic opportunism was called “outrageous”, although Knoll had carefully documented that in reality the Church had often not only tolerated, but explicitly endorsed acts of suppression and violence by Catholic governments. On the political side, he was charged with propagating the Communist and Socialist agenda. When his 1962 book was out of print after a few months, Knoll’s enemies even succeeded to thwart a second printing by the same publisher.

But within a few years after Knoll’s death, a remarkable change in the *Zeitgeist* had taken place, by which Catholic ways of thinking were deeply affected. Liberal virtues like freedom of speech became increasingly accepted in Catholic circles, the

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<sup>10</sup>I could not find passages in Knoll’s writings where he distanced himself from Vogelsang’s assaults against Enlightenment philosophy and civil liberties.

<sup>11</sup>Examples are taken from Ernst Topitsch’s introduction to the 2nd edition of Knoll’s book (Knoll 1968, 12f).

hierarchy became more tolerant. It amounts to a rehabilitation of Knoll's position when, in the 1970s the archbishop of Vienna declared that there was no such thing as "Christian politics", but only "politics based on Christian responsibility".

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