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The Cosmic Good. Religious Grounds for Ecological Ethics.

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DANIEL P. SCHEID,
THE COSMIC GOOD. RELIGIOUS GROUNDS FOR ECOLOGICAL ETHICS. OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2016

The ecological crisis being also a moral crisis, a proper response must include a renewed ethical vision (2). In the search of an interreligious ethical foundation to motivate common action in ecology, Scheid employs comparative theology, which is an interplay back and forth between faith traditions in such manner that key components of the other religion become an integral part of the self-articulation of the home tradition (120). The Earth being our common home, Scheid expands the Catholic social principle of common good onto the *cosmic* common good to enfold “the entire commonwealth of creation” (27). He engages the Catholic tradition, especially Thomas Aquinas, Augustine, Thomas Berry, and Pope Francis (*Laudato Si'*) in dialogue with Hindu dharmic ecology, Buddhist interdependence and Lakota balance with all our relations to reconcile the dualisms of theocentrism versus ecocentrism, anthropocentrism versus geocentrism and nature’s intrinsic versus instrumental value.

The Catholic tradition names human dignity as central; Scheid shifts towards the common good to assert interdependency in which the good of the individual emerges only from a healthy social community (18). The cosmos becomes a “commons” and we accept that “the ultimate purpose of other creatures is not to be found in us” (*Laudato Si'*). Humans take on the responsibility of promoting the flourishing of other creatures and safeguarding the conditions under which a diversity of life may flourish (35).

Both Augustine and Aquinas underscore the theocentric nature of the universe, the ability of each creature and the universe as a whole to contribute to the glory of God (47). All creatures have their own goodness and beauty within the scheme of creation, all exist via participation in God. Both, with differing nuances, affirm a hierarchy of creatures, human beings being the end for which nonhuman creatures are made (51). Thomas Berry, building on the thought of Teilhard de Chardin, saw the universe as both a physical and psychic reality. He did not use the term, *cosmic common good*, but it dovetails with his world view. While holding to the infinite creativity of God, he also speaks of cosmogenesis, the inherent creativity of the universe to forge something new (70) as self-emergent, self-sustaining, and self-fulfilling (68). Every being in the universe has its interiority, inner spontaneity, and unique articulation: the star organizes hydrogen and helium and produces elements and light (74). Every creature exists for communion, has its own role to fill in the universe and declares itself in its own voice to every other creature. Self-consciousness properly belongs to the universe, in its human expression (75).

Hindu *dharma*, the law that governs the universe, refers to how all that exists is supported and ordered; it includes nonhumans in the greater good to which humans must contribute. *Ātman*, the stable, changeless self, resides in each creature and performs its dharma; it is the same in all creatures. It can exist as a god, a human, an animal, even a blade of grass. The ethic of *ahimsa* (non-injury, non-violence) respects

the divinity within all creatures. Buddhist *pratītyasamutpāda* (dependent origination, interbeing, interpenetration of beings) *with anattā* (no-self) constructs a universe where everything exists as it is because of its connections to innumerable others. The sense of a separate self is delusional; there is no stable self beneath our physical and mental processes. Each entity consists of innumerable little particles dependent on one another and each creature is both cause and effect. There is no center, or if there is it is everywhere; no hierarchy, no telos or ultimate purpose, no further source outside the universe, which is self-creating, self-maintaining, and self-defining organism (157). Expansion of the self to include the universe reinforces the ecological common good as intrinsically human good. The Lakota are rightly suspicious of “common good” since that was the predicate of their disempowerment and exploitation. For them, the story of imperiled Earth is also theirs as an indigenous people. The prayer, *mitakuye oyasin* (“all my relations”) and the symbolism of the circle portray the kinship of all living and non-living creatures within a particular location and land. Spatiality has priority over temporality, the community (of beings) over the individual. Disruption of the balance or harmony may at times be necessary (for example, hunting for food), but ceremonial acts counterbalance the disruption. Person, society, and the land are intertwined, making a purely human common good unthinkable.

Traditional Catholic social thought derives human rights from equal human dignity as image of God. Rights correspond to responsibility in others, so some theologians insist that rights apply only to human society, for only they exist for moral agents (104). However, Earth has rights that are appropriate to the kind of creature. Rivers have river rights, insects have insect rights (106). Scheid outlines Earth’s Rights on pages 113-115. They include the right to exist as Earth, to the basic creaturely inclinations one possesses as a member of one’s species, to habitat (a place to be and to live), to restoration (for degraded Earth).

This well-researched book on a Catholic cosmic common good ethics integrates insights from Hindu, Buddhist, and Lakota faith traditions on ecology. I highly recommend it to mature readers, ministers and all who advocate care for our common home.

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