

The Cosmic Common Good: Religious Grounds for Ecological Ethics. By Daniel P. Scheid. New York: Oxford University, 2016. Pp. xiv + 248. \$29.95.

Given the suffering caused by ecological degradation to humans and other creatures alike, theology is tasked in our day to bring the natural world back into view as a subject of religious and moral importance. In this broadly researched and clearly written book, Scheid sets out to do just that with one keystone element of Catholic social teaching: the common good. Not only does he rethink features of this principle, expanding it in an ecological direction, but he places this principle in dialogue with Hindu, Buddhist, and American Indian traditions. The point of arrival is an interreligious vision of the cosmic common good which can serve as a basis for ethical action to protect the planet, or “to care for God’s creation” in Catholic language.

The pivotal argument takes robust shape in chapter 2 which, among its major moves, skillfully works through tension that might arise between the dignity of the human person and a common good which includes the created world. If the human person is a relational being with an essentially social nature; and if the common good affirms the inherent value of the whole composed of intrinsically dignified parts, then a way opens for these two principles of Catholic social teaching to function together dynamically. Humans in their dignity are an intimate part of the greater whole of the cosmos, which on this planet includes a wider community of life. Ethical implications abound.

S. then deepens the ethical vision by tracing sources for a cosmic common good in classical thinkers Augustine and Aquinas and the contemporary Thomas Berry, and by working out meanings in two related terms that promote the common good, namely, solidarity and rights, now developed as Earth solidarity and Earth rights. If, buttressed by extensive scientific and theological research, this work had just powerfully rethought the common good in an ecological direction, it would have been enough. But the book’s move into comparative theology gives its argument yet greater relevance. Marked by self-critical, sensitive use of sources, S. constructs theoretical grounds for the cosmic common good accessible to religious traditions despite their differences.

I read this book in light of an experience last spring at a conference celebrating the 125th anniversary of *Rerum Novarum* (1891), which initiated the modern version of Catholic social teaching. Multiple references by the excellent plenary speakers to the common good were relentlessly focused on human beings in our political, economic, and social conditions. My audience-member query about imperiled ecological elements in each of these arrangements received the response that this was an important question that needed to be considered. Then the discussion flowed back to humans only. It is evident that our theological imaginations need to be reoriented from the ground up so that without strain Catholic social teaching positions human beings within the community of creation, to practical and critical effect. Toward that end this book makes a superb contribution.

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