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Pope Francis, Culture of Encounter, the Common Good, and Dharma: Public Theological Conversations Today

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Abstract
Pope Francis is able to communicate common values across borders of religion, regions, and sociopolitical systems. Catholic social teaching on the common good, particularly as articulated and promoted by him as part of a culture of encounter, conveys a relevant message for our times. Approaching the pope's initiative from a South Asian context, I argue that an engagement with dharma, a religioethical vision, can be part of this culture of encounter, especially in public theological conversations about the common good. Specifically, the themes of the common good, like integral ecology and care for the vulnerable, as earnestly promoted by Pope Francis, can converse with dharma for mutual enrichment, even while the basic teachings on human dignity, freedom, and inalienable rights can usefully enrich the latter.

Keywords
common good, culture of encounter, dharma, Pope Francis as public theologian, public theology, polyhedron, public theological conversations

Introduction

Today, resonances of Francis's pontificate reach across regions and sociopolitical landscapes. An apt testimony to this is given by Nageswari Annamalai, a person with

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a Hindu background and author of *Pope Francis—New Manifestation of Hope*.[1] She observes that she wrote the book because of her appreciation for Pope Francis's character and activities—in particular, his nonjudgmental attitude to other religionists; his readiness to dialogue with different religious and political leaders; his concern for ecological well-being, the poor, migrants, and refugees; and his readiness to play a role in settling political disputes. Annamalai believes that everyone, regardless of religion or region of the world, can benefit from the pope's values and contributions.[2]

In this essay, I want to take a cue from her writing and explore aspects of public theology in Pope Francis's writings.[3] His reflections on the culture of encounter and the common good can join in a public theological conversation with dharma,[4] a core religioethical teaching found in the many forms of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and even in the oral literature of popular religious traditions in South Asia. I will explore the possibilities of this conversation in four steps. In the first step, I will highlight certain aspects of Francis's public theology. I will then present his reflections on the culture of encounter and the common good. In the third section, I will give an account of the concept of dharma. Finally, I discuss a few areas of public theological conversation that are possible between Francis's reflections and dharma.

Public Theology and the Theology of Public Life

Coursing through current writings on public theology, we find two streams: public theology *as such* and theology of public life.[5] Doing public theology, in the first sense, would, as envisioned by David Tracy, mean reflecting on the very "publicness" of

1. Nageswari Annamalai, *Pope Francis—Nambikkaiyin Puthiya Parimanam* [Tamil; trans. Pope Francis—New Manifestation of Hope] (Trichy: Adaiyalam Publications, 2017).
2. She took up the challenge of getting to know the person and activities of Pope Francis by extended research, evident in the content and quality of the book.
3. For a concise understanding of public theology, see Sebastian C. H. Kim, *Theology in the Public Sphere: Public Theology as a Catalyst for Open Debate* (London: SCM Press, 2011); Sebastian Kim and Katie Day, eds., *A Companion to Public Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 2017).
4. Public theological conversations are dialogues on religious insights undertaken in forums of public spheres, like those of civil societies, to foster cooperation between different others for pursuing common goals. To understand what is specific about this type of conversation, we can consider the description by Jeffrey Stout. Such a rich dialogue, he suggests, entails "an exchange of views in which the respective parties express their premises in as much detail as they see fit and in whatever idiom they wish, try to make sense of each other's perspectives, and expose their own commitments to the possibility of criticism." Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Traditions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 10–11. Stout discusses the appropriateness of the word "conversation" for religious reasoning in public forums in the context of Richard Rorty's famous criticism of religion as a "conversation-stopper."
5. For a discussion on this distinction see Felix Wilfred, *Asian Public Theologies: Critical Concerns in Our Challenging Times* (New Delhi: ISPCK, 2010).

theology.[6] Such a reflection would defend the possibility that faith in a transcendent God is valid and meaningful to life and that theology has a place in the public sphere like other sciences. Doing a theology of public life is different: it reflects ethically and theologically on common concerns of public life and does it from within a particular faith tradition. This position is the methodological corollary of the contemporary linguistic realization that we are all, in a fundamental sense, located within our own particular traditions and must duly acknowledge their role in our lives. A theologian practicing the theology of public life is one who is located within a particular religious tradition and yet strives to speak in ways accessible to both the religious and the nonreligious in a public forum about concerns common to all.[7]

Aspects of Public Theology in Pope Francis

In light of the foregoing discussion, Pope Francis can be seen as embodying some important aspects of public theology. For example, we see him arguing in public forums with those of different traditions about the need to reawaken the faith in a transcendent God today. Of course, the Catholic Church has always spoken about the need for faith in a transcendent God; it is the mainstay of the Catholic faith. What is new in Pope Francis is his call for a "reawakening of faith" in the present-day context of a deeply entrenching materialistic ethos, along with unbridled greed and the associated ecological problems that it has fostered. For example, in the "Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together," jointly issued with the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, Francis argues for reawakening "religious awareness among young people so that future generations may be protected from the realm of materialistic thinking and from dangerous policies of unbridled greed and indifference."[8] The need for "awakening religious consciousness" is necessary, the document argues, in order to "confront tendencies that are individualistic, selfish, [and] conflicting."[9] Similarly, *Fratelli Tutti* calls the church to "'reawaken the spiritual energy' that can contribute to the betterment of society,"[10] and *Predicate Evangelium* suggests that the primary service of the church to human well-being is "to awaken in

6. David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (London: SCM Press, 1981).
7. Charles T. Mathewes, *Theology of Public Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
8. Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Ahamad al-Tayyib, "A Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together" to the United Arab Emirates (February 4, 2019), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/travels/2019/outside/documents/papa-francesco_20190204_documento-fratellanza-umana.html.
9. Francis, "Human Fraternity."
10. Francis, *Fratelli Tutti* (October 3, 2020), §270, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html (hereafter cited as *FT*).

all peoples the hearing of faith" and bring the "supernatural gift of faith . . . 'as a light for our way, guiding our journey through time.'"[11]

In addition, the pope, along with his predecessors, challenges those who privatize religion: "no one can demand that religion should be relegated to the inner sanctum of personal life, without influence on societal and national life, without concern for the soundness of civil institutions, without a right to offer an opinion on events affecting society."[12]

What characterizes Francis's stance is a "founding rupture" with Christian theology's inhibition towards the public sphere, one that originated in the Enlightenment era. This is the argument made in a recent article by a group of three public theologians: Alfredo Teixeira, Alex Villas Boas, and Jefferson Zeferino.[13] They argue that Pope Francis's writings point to a new theological "going forth" that can be taken as an instance of the founding rupture. In their own words, "the current Catholic pontificate may be understood as a movement of instaurational rupture in favor of a public theology dynamic."[14] Thus we see the pope defending a public theological role for the papacy and, by implication, for every Christian.

Aspects of the Theology of Public Life in Pope Francis

As discussed above, a theology of public life reflects upon common concerns of humanity from within one's own particular tradition but in a public sphere wherein multiple traditions are present. Such reflections offer an open invitation to others either to be inspired by this particular tradition or to theologize similarly from within their own particular traditions about the common good. *Laudato Si'* offers a good example: the pope takes up "the care of the earth"—a concern throughout the world—as the subject of a theological reflection. The encyclical seeks to "bring the whole human family together to seek a sustainable and integral development" as a remedy for our present-day crisis.[15] The theological reflection arises out of the Christian, if not

11. Francis, *Praedicate Evangelium*," Apostolic Constitution on the Roman Curia and Its Service to the Church in the World, March 19, 2022, §1–2, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_constitutions/documents/20220319-costituzione-ap-praedicate-evangelium.html.
12. Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (November 24, 2013), §150, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html (hereafter cited as *EG*).
13. Alfredo Teixeira, Alex Villas Boas, and Jefferson Zeferino, "Public Theology in the Context of the Religious Dualization Phenomenon in Multiple Modernities," *International Journal of Public Theology* 16, no. 2 (June 2022): 216–37, https://doi.org/10.1163/15697320-20220041.
14. Teixeira, Boas, and Zeferino, "Public Theology," 235.
15. Francis, *Laudato Si'* (May 14, 2015), §13, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html (hereafter cited as *LS*).

specifically Catholic, tradition. This particular grounding is evident in how it takes its inspiration from Saint Francis of Assisi (a Catholic saint), integrates a biblical theology of creation, analyzes the root causes of the problem with the help of the sciences, proposes dialogue at both the international and national level for "integral ecology," and ends with spiritual exhortations calling for the sacramental practice of the Eucharist, faith in Trinity, and devotion to Mary. It is, thus, a moral theological document on a public concern that firmly emerges from the Catholic tradition, even as the intended audience extends beyond that tradition—that is, other religionists, along with nonbelievers and those indifferent to religion.

The pope observes that "we need to realize that the solutions will not emerge from just one way of interpreting and transforming reality" and therefore encourages wider participation of people from different ideological persuasions in order to solve a common problem.[16] Such participation, in the form of dialogues or conversations at various levels, should seek to integrate the "various cultural riches . . . their art and poetry, their interior life and spirituality" in response to the problems facing us.[17] If humanity is earnest in finding a remedy for the ecological crisis, then "no branch of the sciences and no form of wisdom can be left out," the pope observes, "and that includes religion and the language particular to it."[18] He encourages all to embrace an "'ecological citizenship' that can be understood as the foundation of new civic forms of relationships between humans and other living beings."[19]

This is a good example of a theology of public life found in Pope Francis's writings. Though concern for the environment is present in Catholic social teaching starting with Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Octogesima Adveniens*,[20] Pope Francis's treatment of the subject is more elaborate, gripping, and dialogical: he devotes an entire encyclical to this common concern and invites everyone to join in public conversations for cultivating the virtue of integral ecology. The culture of encounter that he advocates very pertinently facilitates such conversations.

A Culture of Encounter and the Common Good

Pope Francis identifies, as well as promotes, a culture of encounter in the present-day globalized context of thick plurality and high interdependence in cultural, economic, political, and social relationships. These relationships deeply impact us, even amidst

16. *LS*, §63.
17. *LS*, §63.
18. *LS*, §63.
19. *LS*, §211 and Jelson Roberto de Oliveira and Clovis Ultramari, "The Eutopian City: The Challenge of Urban Conviviality in the *Laudato Si'* and *Fratelli Tutti* Encyclicals," *International Journal of Public Theology* 16, no. 2 (2022): 168, https://doi.org/10.1163/15697320-20220038.
20. Paul VI, *Octogesima Adveniens* (May 14, 1971), §21, https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_letters/documents/hf_p-vi_apl_19710514_octogesima-adveniens.html.

conflicts, confrontations, and fragmentations. Quoting Vinicius de Moraes, a Brazilian poet, the pope states that "life, for all its confrontations, is the art of encounter."[21] And the space created by this encounter is, for the pope, the "luminous space opened up by God's love for all his creatures."[22] It is indeed an opening of new horizons and hope in our lives.

The pope points to several requirements on our part for experiencing the culture of encounter. It requires that we be available to the other more openly. He states, "a culture of encounter means that we, as a people, should be passionate about meeting others, seeking points of contact, building bridges, planning a project that includes everyone."[23] It is a "culture which privileges dialogue as a form of encounter."[24] This dialogue is not just a method of achieving consensus for Pope Francis but a way of life. It includes one's encounter with God, with one's own self, and with different others, especially with the poor and the marginalized in social relationships, as well as dialogues between different cultures, religions, disciplinary sciences, moral goods, ideologies, and political systems. All are perpetually involved in abiding encounters through multiple forms of dialogue.[25]

An image that the pope uses to capture the dialogical encounter is the polyhedron, which reflects his appreciation of the reality of plurality today. It stands for a type of encounter that brings together different others with their own unique features and radical differences. With a sphere, different points gain their value in terms of their relationship to a perceived normative center. In contrast, with the polyhedron, every point obtains value in terms of its unique potential, resources, and contexts. He explains:

> The image of a polyhedron can represent a society where differences coexist, complementing, enriching and reciprocally illuminating one another, even amid disagreements and reservations. Each of us can learn something from others. No one is useless and no one is expendable. This also means finding ways to include those on the peripheries of life. For they have another way of looking at things; they see aspects of reality that are invisible to the centres of power where weighty decisions are made.[26]

In this polyhedral vision, differences are not obstacles but creative elements for progress. He says, "differences are creative; they create tension and in the resolution of tension lies humanity's progress."[27]

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21. *FT*, §215.
22. Francis, *Veritatis Gaudium*, Apostolic Constitution on Ecclesiastical Universities and Faculties (January 29, 2018), §4.a.
23. *FT*, §216.
24. *EG*, §239.
25. That entire sections in *Laudato Si'* (chapter 5), *Evangelii Gaudium* (section IV of chapter 4), and *Fratelli Tutti* (chapter 6) are dedicated to examining multiple kinds and levels of dialogues evidences the priority accorded by Pope Francis to dialogue as a primary way for existing in a world of plurality and culture of encounter.
26. *FT*, §215.
27. *FT*, §203.

In encouraging dialogue, Pope Francis is not beginning a new tradition. Dialogue has been promoted in the Catholic Church for a long time. For example, the short Vatican II document *Nostra Aetate* speaks about "dialogues and collaboration" with people of other religions;[28] *Gaudium et Spes* advocates "brotherly dialogue" to cultivate interpersonal relationships in the context of increasing individualism;[29] and Paul VI's *Populorum Progressio* views "sincere dialogue" to create "brotherly love" as the mark of progress and development;[30] John Paul II discusses the dialogue between faith and reason;[31] and Benedict XVI speaks of truth (logos) that creates dia-logos (dialogue) for communication and communion.[32]

However, there are elements that distinguish Pope Francis from the previous teachings on, and engagement with, dialogue. First of all, the impressive list of levels and fields he brings into the ambit of dialogue marks him out. In *Laudato Si'*, he discusses dialogues at the international, national, and local levels that bring together the fields of politics, economics, religion, and the sciences.[33] These diverse fields and levels of encounter underscore how every moment of our life is dialogical. They illuminate the richness, spiritual depth, creative potential, and religious visions of a life of dialogue.

Second, he distinguishes himself in proposing dialogues that are more dynamic, contemporaneous, and open-ended, as distinct from those proposed by the philosopher Pope John Paul II and the theologian Pope Benedict XVI. Pope John Paul II, while proposing dialogue between faith and reason, sees philosophic thought as "often the only ground for understanding and dialogue with those who do not share our faith."[34] Benedict XVI, reflecting on "love in truth" (*Caritas in Veritate*), dwells upon the theme of "truth enlightening love" wherein truth, the logos—analogous to Jesus Christ, the revealed logos, who said, "I am the truth" (Jn 10:6)—creates dia-logos, "hence communication and communion."[35] While the former focuses on philosophic

28. Paul VI, *Nostra Aetate*, The Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (October 28, 1965), §2 https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html.
29. Paul VI, *Gaudium et Spes*, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (December 7, 1965), §23, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.
30. Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, Encyclical on the Development of Peoples (March 26, 1967), §73 and §66, https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_26031967_populorum.html.
31. John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, Encyclical Letter to the Bishops on the Relationship between Faith and Reason (September 14, 1998), §48. John Paul II says that "the *parrhesia* of faith must be matched by the boldness of reason," https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091998_fides-et-ratio.html.
32. Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, Encyclical Letter on Integral Human Development in Charity and Truth (June 29, 2009), §4, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html.
33. *LS*, §163–201.
34. John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, §104.
35. Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, §4.

thought, the latter sees the truth—the logos—as the basic framework for dialogue. Pope Francis understands dialogue in terms of the ongoing reality of encounter. For him, truth is dynamic, emerging through experiences of dialogue, mutual relationships, and creative initiatives. "Together, we can seek the truth in dialogue," says the pope.[36] His observation in *Evangelii Gaudium* regarding the proclamation of the Gospel is instructive:

> It should not impose the truth but appeal to freedom; it should be marked by joy, encouragement, liveliness and a harmonious balance which will not reduce preaching to a few doctrines which are at times more philosophical than evangelical. All this demands on the part of the evangelizer certain attitudes which foster openness to the message: approachability, readiness for dialogue, patience, a warmth and welcome which is non-judgmental.[37]

This dynamic opening to others through a process of dialogical encounters comes rather spontaneously to the pope. This may be due to his Jesuit background. David Hollenbach, a leading contemporary public theologian on Catholic social teaching and the common good, observes that the Jesuits have a history of bold missionary encounters with different civilizations.[38] This opening to others adds to Francis's credibility as a public theologian in a characteristically pluralist and multi-polar world, which, nevertheless, endeavors to live by the ideals of common good.

Pope Francis on the Common Good

The rich history of Catholic social teaching shapes Pope Francis's articulation of the common good: Pointing to the role of faith in the Catholic vision of the common good, he says, "faith is truly a good, a common good."[39] Underscoring the value of the dignity and rights of the human person, he states that "underlying the principle of the common good is respect for the human person as such, endowed with basic and inalienable rights ordered to his or her integral development."[40] In regard to family life, the pope observes that respecting the individuality of marriage partners is an important aspect of the common good.[41] In his writing on the environment, he says, "climate is a common good."[42] Advocating distributive justice for marginal communities, he says,

36. *FT*, §50.
37. *EG*, §227.
38. David Hollenbach, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
39. Francis, *Lumen Fidei* (June 29, 2013), §51, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20130629_enciclica-lumen-fidei.html.
40. *LS*, §157.
41. Francis, *Amoris Laetitia* (March 19, 2016), §139, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia.html.
42. *LS*, §23.

"the common good calls for social peace, the stability and security provided by a certain order which cannot be achieved without particular concern for distributive justice."[43] Emphasizing the smooth functioning of civil institutions and nations, he speaks for their independence and autonomous development as part of the common good.[44] Envisioning a global community of fraternity, the pope states, "The development of a global community of fraternity based on the practice of social friendship on the part of peoples and nations calls for a better kind of politics, one truly at the service of the common good."[45] Treating our solidarity with future generations as part of the common good, he says, "The global economic crises have made painfully obvious the detrimental effects of disregarding our common destiny, which cannot exclude those who come after us. We can no longer speak of sustainable development apart from intergenerational solidarity."[46] Thus we see that Pope Francis's articulation of the common good is a comprehensive adaptation of Catholic social teaching for today.

Moreover, we see that Francis treats the subject more as an open-ended process and a project in which everyone should be involved in ways that build on their distinctive potentials and gifts. In *Rerum Novarum*, Leo XIII stated that all citizens were called to contribute to the common good, even while the responsibility for ensuring the right conditions for the common good had largely been thought to be the responsibility of civil/public authorities or the state.[47] In *Mater et Magistra*, John XXIII described the common good as the "social conditions which favour the full development of human personality," but believed that the responsibility of providing these conditions rested with public authorities.[48] The common good was more definitively articulated in structural terms by Paul VI in *Gaudium et Spes* as "the sum of those conditions of the social life whereby men, families and associations more adequately and readily may attain their own perfection."[49] This tradition of understanding the common good in terms of the conditions of social living continues, and Pope Francis integrates this aspect in *Laudato Si'*.[50]

However, in several instances in his writings, the pope presents the common good more as a *process* in which everyone is involved and that its content and methods emerge through the loving participation of all in the process. For example, in the context of speaking about the role of communication in the contemporary world, the pope says, "we need constantly to ensure that present-day forms of

43. *LS*, §157.
44. *FT*, §108, §143.
45. *FT*, §154.
46. *LS*, §159.
47. Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum* (May 15, 1891), §34, https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_15051891_rerum-novarum.html.
48. John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra* (May 15, 1961), §65, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_15051961_mater.html.
49. Paul VI, *Gaudium et Spes*, §74.
50. *LS*, §156.

communication are in fact guiding us to generous encounters with others, to honest pursuit of the whole truth, to service, closeness to the underprivileged and to the promotion of the common good."[51] Again, speaking about social peace, he says "it is an open-ended endeavour, a never-ending task that demands the commitment of everyone . . . [and] this task summons us to persevere in the struggles to promote a culture of encounter."[52] At the center of this task is human dignity and the common good. Furthermore, he teaches that "we believers need to find occasions to speak with one another and to act together for the common good and the promotion of the poor."[53] These few selected statements give us a sense that working for the common good is a constant commitment of all by joining in a continuing open-ended process.

Pope Francis's understanding of the common good as an ongoing process grounds his focus on the concerns of the present day. Prominent among these is care for our earth in the face of an epochal environmental crisis, social friendship or fraternity in the face of alarmingly increasing social conflicts, and care for the vulnerable in the globalized context wherein the poor, migrants, and refugees are victimized. Though these concerns have been treated by previous popes, especially by his two immediate predecessors, I believe the elaborate and passionate way in which they are treated as indispensable concerns of the common good is distinct to Pope Francis.

Take for example the way the pope integrates the well-being and dignity of the vulnerable, the poor, refugees, migrants, and the marginalized into his articulation of the common good. The pope articulates it aptly in *Laudato Si'*:

> In the present condition of global society, where injustices abound and growing numbers of people are deprived of basic human rights and considered expendable, the principle of the common good immediately becomes, logically and inevitably, a summons to solidarity and a preferential option for the poorest of our brothers and sisters. This option entails recognizing the implications of the universal destination of the world's goods, but, as I mentioned in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, it demands before all else an appreciation of the immense dignity of the poor in the light of our deepest convictions as believers. We need only look around us to see that, today, this option is in fact an ethical imperative essential for effectively attaining the common good.[54]

This import of the common good, which is a transcendental yet temporal good, constituted by a concern for individual dignity, along with an emphasis on the rights of the poor, sustained by civil institutions, and continually nurtured through a culture of encounter, can well be an inspiring partner with others in public theological conversations.

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51. *FT*, §205.
52. *FT*, §232.
53. *FT*, §282.
54. *LS*, §158.

Dharma

Dharma, a religioethical doctrine of universal well-being prevalent in South Asia, can become a potential partner in a public theological conversation. It is treated in a number of texts: in the Sanskritic scriptural texts of the Vedas, Upanishads, dharmasutras, dharmashastras, *Puranas*, and *Bhagavad Gita*; in the texts of Buddhism and Jainism; in the texts of Saivism and Vaishnavism; and in the oral literatures of many grassroots popular religious traditions. As Indologist Patrick Olivelle observes, "dharma is . . . central not only in the Brahmanical/Hindu traditions, but also in the Buddhist and Jain."[55]

Etymologically, the term dharma comes from the Sanskrit root *dhr*, which means to hold or support.[56] The term, in its verb form *dharman*, occurs in *Rig Veda*—the first of the four Vedic texts—and speaks of the cosmic actions of gods;[57] for example, "holding the sky and earth apart,"[58] "taking care of the smooth transitioning of seasons," and "protecting the creatures."[59] The actions of the gods were believed to be self-abnegating, carried out to maintain the cosmic order. Subsequently, these actions of the gods were mirrored in priests who, through their ritual actions, were believed to be imitating the gods.[60] As Joel P. Brereton opines, these ritual actions were considered indispensable to the stability, regularity, and permanence of the cosmic order.[61]

During the age of Upanishads (ca. 700–500 BCE), which followed the Vedic age, the ritual and cosmic senses of dharma came to represent predominantly actions to maintain the social order. A group of Indian philosophers came to perceive dharma as a major transition from *rta* (the order in nature, the macrocosmic order) to *satya* (the inner microcosmic order, the moral law).[62] Human actions to maintain this order were prescribed in the dharmasutras and the dharmashastras—important Sanskritic texts that emerged towards the end of the Vedic age.[63] Here we begin to see two contrasting

55. Patrick Olivelle, trans. and ed., *Dharmasutras: The Law of Codes of Apastamba, Gautama, Baudhayana, and Vasistha* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), xxxvii.
56. For a detailed understanding of the etymological origin of this word, see Patrick Olivelle, ed., *Dharma: Studies in Its Semantic, Religious and Cultural History* (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas Publishers, 2009); Adam Bowles, *Dharma, Disorder and the Political in Ancient India: The Apaddharmaparvan of the Mahabharatha* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 84; Paul Horsch, "From Creation Myth to World Law: The Early History of *Dharma*," trans. Jarrod L. Whatker, in Olivelle, *Dharma*, 2; Joel P. Brereton, "*Dharman* in the *Rgveda*," in Olivelle, *Dharma*, 28.
57. Bowles, *Dharma*, *Disorder and the Political*, 85; Brereton, "*Dharman* in the *Rgveda*," 27–67.
58. Holding the sky and earth apart was considered the sublime activity of gods as per the Vedic cosmogony. Bowles, *Dharma*, *Disorder and the Political*, 85.
59. Horsch, "From Creation Myth," 2.
60. Horsch, "From Creation Myth," 6.
61. Brereton, "*Dharman* in the *Rgveda*," 29.
62. Horsch, "From Creation Myth," 1–26.
63. Adam Bowles places the emergence of dharmasutras between 600 and 400 BCE. Bowles, *Dharma, Disorder and the Political*, 37ff.; Patrick Olivelle notes P. V. Kane's dating of

concepts of dharma. The Vedas deemed the fulfillment of the ritual actions as dharma, while the dharmasutras and dharmashastras defined dharma as fulfilling one's duty in social relationships. The latter prescribed duties as per one's *varna*, which was the primordial fourfold social division. Dharma (duty) as per the *manu-smriti* (Laws of Manu, ca. 100 CE) became *ashrama* dharma according to one's *varna* and therefore was known as *varnashrama* dharma.[64] As Indologist Paul Hacker notes, "*dharma* is by definition *varnashrama dharma*, that is the *dharma* of castes and life-stages."[65] Thus we see that the original meaning of dharma as action in relation to the outer cosmic order and the inner moral order was restricted to duties related to *varna*-based social order. This *varnashrama dharma* has held sway over the social relationship in the South Asian region for many centuries.

However, today spiritual leaders and philosophers seek to revive the original meaning in terms of a universal order—cosmic and moral. For example, in *Hindu Dharma: The Universal Way of Life*, Chandrasekharendra Saraswathi, a well-known teacher of Vedantic Hinduism, makes a case for the universality of Hindu dharma.[66] He believes that this dharma, rooted in the Vedic religion, is the universal law that is present in the physical world and from which human beings derive their moral law (dharma). As nature experiences harmony when the physical laws are in order, so will human beings experience order when they submit themselves to this age-old dharma.[67] According to Saraswati, we should return to this dharma so that we can live in harmony, truthfulness, and justice.[68] (It is apt to note here that Mahatma Gandhi, the face of the struggle

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early documents of dharmasutras: "Kane (1962–75, i) has given some tentative upper and lower limits: Gautama 600–400, Apastamba 450–350, Baudhayana 500–200, and Vasistha 300–100, all BCE," Olivelle, *Dharmasutras: The Law Codes*, xxxi. Some of these periods coincide with those of Upanishads (700–500 BCE), which came at the end of Vedas. However, Olivelle himself places the period for the emergence of the earlier documents of dharmasutras between the early third to the middle of second century BCE (Olivelle, *Dharmasutras*, xxxiv). If one goes by Olivelle, the period could be even after the period of the Upanishads. Since the focus of my article is not on the time period, I request the readers to consult the experts on the subject.

64. *Ashrama* stands for a stage in life and the anglicized plural *ashramas* refers to the four stages in life as prescribed in the *manu-smriti*; see https://www.britannica.com/topic/Manu-smriti; Bowles, *Dharma, Disorder and the Political*, 37; Neeraj Arjun Gupta, ed., *Views on Hindu Dharma by M.K. Gandhi* (London: Routledge, 2018), 82. Mahatma Gandhi claims to derive the concept of *varnashrama* dharma from *Bhagavad Gita*.
65. Hacker, "Dharma in Hinduism," in Olivelle, ed. *Dharma*, 478.
66. Chandrasekharendra Saraswati, *Hindu Dharma: The Universal Way of Life* (Chennai, India: Bharathiya Vidya Bhavan, 1995), 70.
67. Saraswati, *Hindu Dharma*, 31.
68. Social reformers in India have invariably denounced this *varnasrama* dharma as the root cause of the caste system that legitimizes social discrimination and oppression. However, Saraswati defends it by saying, "according to our reformers all our ills are due to the caste system. But it is this land with this unique system—varnasrama—that has excelled all other nations in metaphysics, in the arts, in social values and in wisdom." Saraswati, *Hindu Dharma*, 99.

for Indian political independence, also exhorts Indians to "restore the *varna dharma* to its purity," which, according to him, is a calling for a particular occupation as per one's birth and has nothing to do with the caste discrimination.[69])

There were also other versions of dharma prevalent in the South Asian region from very ancient times. For example, Buddhism spoke of *dhamma* (the rendering of dharma in the Pali language) as a core moral good cultivated through the four "immeasurables" (four jewels): *metta* (loving kindness), *karuna* (compassion), *mudita* (empathetic/sympathetic joy), and *upekkha* (equanimity). All four immeasurables are altruistic virtues oriented towards the well-being of all. As Annabella Pitkin observes, these virtues evoke "the foundational Buddhist values of love and compassion extended equally toward all living beings without bias or restriction."[70]

Furthermore, the many internal variations within the two major Hindu theistic traditions—Saivism and Vaisnavism—offer alternate interpretations of dharma. For example, a major popular narrative in Vaisnavism is about the ten avatars who were born at different epochs to establish dharma, the righteous moral and social order, whenever adharma, the opposite of dharma, surged ahead.[71] Another set of narratives, emergent during the modern era, especially in the socioreligious movements of the subaltern or marginalized sections of society, are significant reinterpretations of the very concept of dharma itself. Many of them are informed by their sociocultural contexts, and they highlight the emancipatory aspirations of marginalized and oppressed people for dignity and equality.[72] A good example of this is a socioreligious movement known as *Ayya Vazhi*, a heterodox Hindu tradition premised on emancipatory theological propositions.[73]

In a different vein, Chaturvedi Badrinath, a Sahitya Academy Awardee,[74] argues that dharma is a civilizational concept. "The true identity of Indian civilization has been *dharmic* . . . the one concern from which everything in Indian thought flowed, and on which every movement of life ultimately depended, is dharma, order."[75] Dharma, he believes, should be nurtured as a civilizational concept.

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69. Gupta, *Views on Hindu Dharma*, 84.
70. Annabella Pitkin, "Love of Neighbour in Buddhism," in vol. 2, *Encyclopedia of Love in World Religions*, ed. Yudit Kornberg Greenberg (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2008), 379.
71. Ten avatars are generally believed to have manifested or appeared at different epochs. For a detailed study, see Robert Antoine, Richard de Smet, and Josef Neuner, eds., *Religious Hinduism: A Presentation and Appraisal* (Allahabad, India: St. Paul Publications, 1964).
72. Stephen Fuchs, *Rebellious Prophets: A Study of Messianic Movements in Indian Religions* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1965).
73. G. Patrick, *Religion as Subaltern Agency: Ayya Vazhi, a Subaltern Religious Phenomenon in South Tiruvitankur* (Chennai, India: Department of Christian Studies, University of Madras, 2002). Similar socioreligious movements have been studied by Stephen Fuchs in *Rebellious Prophets* and Kenneth W. Jones, *Socio-Religious Reform Movements in British India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).
74. The Sahitya Academy is an Indian governmental body that annually awards the best literary creations in the Indian context.
75. Chaturvedi Badrinath, *Dharma, India and World Order: Twenty-one Essays* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrews Press, 1993), 11 and 32.

Thus, we see multiple meanings of dharma depending on their specific traditions. At the risk of simplification, the following can be taken as its core: what emerges from the major traditions is a recognition of a universal sphere, identified as cosmic, moral, and social order; what are given in the Buddhist traditions are courses of ethical actions oriented towards the well-being of others; and, what emerges from socioreligious movements are reinterpretations that are focused on achieving freedom, equality, and dignity for marginalized and oppressed people. As an overall concept, dharma can be taken to mean a universal cosmic, moral, and social order, embodying virtues of righteousness, equanimity, dignity, equality, and the well-being of all in the global family.

Whether these traditions can meaningfully converse with Pope Francis's vision of the common good in the ambience of a polyhedral culture of encounter is the question for us here. I would have liked to address this question in an elaborate and in-depth manner. However, within the confines of this article, I will limit myself to suggesting some possible areas of public theological conversations.

Possible Areas of Conversation

I want to suggest possible areas in terms of some convergences and divergences between the common good and dharma.

An important area of convergence is the theology of natural law. This supports the Catholic doctrine of the common good on the one hand and the belief in dharma as the universal cosmic and moral order on the other. Both believe in a given order of reality that is moral, transcendental, universal, and eternal. This order ensures harmony in nature (the macrocosmos) and in humans (the microcosmos) when recognized and adhered to through right conduct. It also binds humanity to the environment with a deeper sense of affinity. As T. N. Koshoo reflects, "there is a deep interconnectedness between dharma, ecology and environment that surround all forms of life all the time."[76] The concept of *vasudhaiva kutumbakam* ("the earth, is thus, a family") is a kindred theme of dharma and further augments the affinity and convergence with the vision of integral ecology as elaborated by Pope Francis.[77] It also resonates well with the ecological spirituality that the pope advocates in *Laudato Si'*.[78]

Yet another area of convergence is found in the care for the vulnerable, the poor, the oppressed, refugees, migrants, and the marginalized—those who are victims of an unjust social order. Pope Francis integrates this care with great empathy in his vision of the common good. Spurred on by the Argentinian theology of the people, the pope makes a passionate plea not merely to care for the vulnerable but to establish justice for victims in a malfunctioning social order. He combines the "cry of the poor" with the "cry of the earth" and finds the technocratic paradigm to be at the root of the

76. T. N. Khoshoo, "The Dharma of Ecology," *Current Science* 77, no. 9 (10 November 1999): 1147, https://www.jstor.org/stable/24103696.
77. *Maha Upanishad*, trans. A. G. Krishna Warrier, http://www.advaita.it/library/mahaupanishad.htm, §71–73.
78. *LS*, §217ff.

suffering of both. What emerges in Francis's teachings on the common good is an unmistakable appeal to a distributive justice that contributes to both social and environmental harmony.

In the case of dharma, the theme of avatar embodies the religious vision for the preferential care of the victims of unjust social order. As mentioned above, Vaisnavism, a major theistic Hindu tradition, speaks elaborately about the belief in the birth of gods (avatars) to establish righteousness (dharma) whenever unrighteousness (adharma) takes over. It is a faith in divine interventions to set right the moral order so as to do justice for the powerless, the lowly, and the oppressed.[79] Many socioreligious movements within this tradition reinterpret the doctrine of dharma as action for the uplift of the lowly and the oppressed. Teachings like these can be potent for addressing our contemporary public concerns. For example, in the case of India, the constitutional provision for reservation (affirmative action) to the depressed classes of people can be effectively implemented when these teachings inform the conscience of the people. Pope Francis's care for the vulnerable and the idea of divine interventions that establish dharma for the powerless can converse fruitfully in the public domain.

Perhaps a good opportunity to learn from each other lies in the radical divergence in their cosmogonies. While the Catholic vision of the common good roots itself in a creator God who is the author of the natural law, the doctrine of dharma is, for the most part, understood as an impersonal ultimate reality: eternal, without a beginning or a creator.[80] Likewise, the Buddhist vision of *dhamma* does not support the idea of a creator God. This radical difference is a challenge for both sides, but it also presents an opportunity to encounter the other by engaging in conversations across incommensurable and comprehensive doctrines. Francis's insight on the polyhedron helps us enter the conversation with confidence.

Another area of a productive but challenging conversation is the theological anthropology of the individual and the community. Pope Francis, in line with Catholic social teaching, has emphasized the dignity and the inalienable rights of the individual, as each person is created in the image and likeness of God. This becomes the cornerstone of the Catholic vision of human communities, which are organically constituted by rights-bearing, dignified individuals. This theological anthropology could be an issue for the dharma-based vision of the individual, who is primarily a duty-performing agent deeply embedded in kinship-based ascriptive communities. Individuals are expected to perform the duties prescribed to the community into which they are born. This is a good place to recall that, in the 1990s, the prime ministers of Malaysia and Singapore countered the validity of the UN-sponsored human rights discourse on the grounds that "Asian values," which are kinship-based community bonds, differed from that discourse.

79. This might remind us of the Christian doctrine of incarnation, but is not the same as an avatar. Nonetheless, a public conversation about the doctrines of incarnation and avatars may well be apt for our world.

80. It is to be noted that in some theistic Hindu traditions, dharma was treated as the will of a personal deity. For example, in *Bhagavad Gita*, the deity Krishna instructs the warrior Arjuna on his dharma.

The danger of such ascriptive kinship-based community bonds can also lead to the dominance of communities over individuals, with the unintended salience of oppressive control over the freedom of individuals. Thus, today we are faced with majoritarian and nationalistic politics that sail on the wings of particular communitarian identities. Agendas of religiocultural nationalism and sectarian, ethnic identities are distorting the liberal values of individual freedom, equality, and dignity. The ideals associated with liberal democracy—constitutional democratic governance, the rule of law, and the structures of civic participation—are, to say the least, at a weak stage of development in South Asia. The democracies of the region are fledgling political systems in spite of lofty claims. What is lacking in these countries is perhaps at the very heart of democracy: the civic participation of citizens at an appreciable level so as to constitute a reasonably good democratic polity. Instead, we are confronting a historical scuttling of the democratic process due to the salience of majoritarian forces feeding on kinship-based ascriptive communitarian bonds.

We would do well to challenge, interrogate, and nourish the dharmic vision with the teachings on the dignity and rights of individuals. A public conversation in this regard will contribute significantly to the process of maturation of democratic principles in South Asia. However, Western culture also has much to learn. For example, it has given birth to extreme forms of liberal individualism, which is incapable of questioning the abysmal rich-poor divide, inducing an unjust economic order. It has also contributed to an ambience of indifference to common concerns. Such situations can be creatively countered by the positive dimensions of the communitarian visions of the common good.

It is understandable, then, that Western political philosophers are gripped by this concern over the place of the individual, leading to a crucial debate on the common good between the proponents of liberalism and communitarianism. As David Hollenbach states, there can be no meaningful vision of the common good today without attempting to face the challenges of bringing together the liberal and communitarian perspectives.[81] Among the attempts to bring about a synthesis of the two is the proposal for communal liberalism by Catholic ethicist Brian Stiltner.[82]

At this juncture, the reflections of Pope Francis on the common good find their relevance. True to the Catholic tradition, he situates the communitarian vision within the framework of the Christian faith in the transcendent God. However, he also values the radical plurality of communitarian traditions (religious, moral, ideological, cultural, political, etc.) emerging in the present-day process of globalization and endeavors to bring together these traditions (including atheistic ideological traditions) into public theological conversations through a culture of encounter. A conversation between Pope Francis's vision of the common good and the positivity of dharma as a universal, cosmic, moral order, which embodies equanimity, equality, and the well-being of all, especially of the vulnerable, is in the right direction.

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81. David Hollenbach, *The Common Good*, 133.
82. Brian Stiltner, *Religion and Common Good: Catholic Contributions to Building Community in a Liberal Society* (Lanham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield, 1999).

Conclusion

The resonances of Francis's pontificate reach distant shores today. People across cultures, religions, regions, and sociopolitical systems appreciate his personality, values, and efforts as a spiritual leader of public significance. As a public theologian, he speaks out for the public role of faith in God as mediated by different religions. As a theologian of public life, he speaks on contemporary common concerns. Based on the global public impact the pope is making today, we would do well to bring his reflections into public conversations with similar teachings across the globe. As an example, this article has indicated the possibility of a conversation in an ambience of the culture of encounter between Francis's articulation of the common good and the theme of dharma from South Asia, and I have highlighted some possible areas of public theological conversations in terms of certain convergences and divergences. Case studies on particular aspects, which have not been explored here due to lack of space, would further promote public theological conversations for the cause of the common good in our pluralistic global world today.

Author Biography

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