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Book Review

Sacramental Commons: Christian Ecological Ethics. By John Hart. New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006. 248 pages. \$82.50 (\$29.95 paper).
Published in *Zygon* 43.4 (December 2008), 995-998.

Building upon biblical, traditional Christian, and Native American spirituality, John Hart provides a solid basis for thinking about and functioning within Earth as a shared space through which the immanent and transcendent Creator-Spirit can be encountered. All humans, other species, abiota, ecological systems, and the biosphere surface in the author's text as interrelated and interdependent sacramental common goods infused by the Creator with the capability of achieving their mutual common good. While ample evidence attests to human interference with this goal, Hart maintains that people who are sacramentally conscious will be guided to care about and for creation as a whole, for members of the biotic community, and for oppressed humans who do not have access to natural goods they need to sustain their lives.

Hart comes to this project with considerable experience in researching, writing, and teaching about Christian sources for addressing ecological issues. His insights and wisdom loom large in pastoral statements by bishops and at least one pope of the Roman Catholic Church for whom he served as a principal writer. He currently teaches at Boston University School of Theology where, as Professor of Christian Ethics, he integrates a multiple disciplinary approach to concerns that affect poor people, other species, and ecological systems.

In *Sacramental Commons*, he brings together the various dimensions of his expertise into a systematic treatment that is insightful, informative, and inspiring. The text is divided into four parts, each with

three chapters in which Hart supports his thesis systematically, well-supported by a diversity of sources. He relies heavily on biblical and other texts for their deep meaning, avoiding their literal interpretation. His theological and ethical reflections are informed by broad contemporary scientific findings that yield cogent discourse on his topic. While his forté lies in the Catholic Christian theological tradition, he incorporates and appeals to the sense of the sacred that is found in other religions as well as in native and nature spiritualities.

Creation is the subject of the first part of this book. Here Hart focuses on the role of the transcendent-immanent Creator Spirit in bringing the universe into existence, permeating it, and dwelling within it, thereby making sacred all that emerges over cosmological and biological time. Signs of the Spirit are visible through creation, he insists, and he explores its sacramental character from the perspective of visionaries who are depicted in the Hebrew and Christian biblical texts and in the works of three Christian mystics--Maximus the Confessor, Hildegard von Bingen, and Francis of Assisi, though there are indeed many more patristic and medieval writers who exude a sacramental understanding of God's creation whom Hart could have selected for this discussion. Affinities that Francis of Assisi has with Lakota Sioux elder and healer Black Elk and with Muskogee Creek elder and healer Phillip Deere are identified. Like Francis, these two acclaimed Native Americans communed with the Spirit in the world, were committed to compassion for others, especially the poor and oppressed, in their various biological and social communities, valued them for their intrinsic value, and demonstrated a sense of kinship with non-human creatures. Signs of the Spirit continue to be seen by people of various cultures, Hart contends, and the recognition of these signs constitutes a sacramental consciousness that can inspire people to see others--human and non-human--as their relatives and to seek their well-being in the community of life. Without a vision of this kind, Hart insists, "people will perish" (xxv).

In a reality check with a wider vision of the literature by and about religious visionaries, Hart recognizes Francis's occasional negation of creation when prioritizing the human quest for eternal life and the anticipation that Jesus would save humans from the physical world (37). That humans are integral to Earth with other species and the abiotic environment is an understanding on which the author insists, and viewing Earth through a sacramental lens should help maintain the positive view that he promotes.

In part two, Hart stresses the interdependence and interrelatedness of members of biotic communities that interact with the abiotic environment. Together they constitute the "sacramental commons" in which living entities strive to meet their needs for sustenance. As constituents of the commons, humans should recognize the sacramental character of their and other species with their shared habitats and should pursue their common good. Several helpful principles for promoting the common good are proffered (68). Humans should follow these principles, Hart urges, and their sacramental vision of creation can motivate them to do so. The life and actions of environmentalist John Muir give testimony to this possibility as do the efforts of municipalities that have assured the accessibility of potable water (e.g., Bogata, Colombia and Indianapolis, Indiana) to people in their communities as their human and natural right (82-83) and the initiatives of the Wanapum people on the Columbia-Snake river systems to address the plight of salmon that are integral to their culture. Hart is encouraged by the recent emergence of "relational consciousness" among Christians that he describes as "a mode of thinking in which one appreciates otherkind as mutually connected beings in the

cosmos.” This way of thinking can serve as the basis for “relational ethics in which the value and rights of both human and nonhuman creation are advocated, and right conduct toward this interdependent community of being is promoted” (109-10).

Community relationships is the focus of the third part of *Sacramental Commons*. Hart covers relationships within the human community, between humans and the rest of the biotic community, and between creation and the Spirit Creator. He recognizes both collaborative and competitive relationships among species in the biotic community as well as their dependence on the environment (air, land, and water) for their survival. While all have intrinsic value in themselves as constituents of the sacramental commons, he observes, some are instruments to others, particularly in predator-prey relationships. Yet intrinsic value “precedes, endures through, and is greater than their instrumental value,” Hart contends (xxiv), as he promotes the codification of laws that expand the natural rights of humans to include other species and the abiota anthropocentric view of reality (131-36). Among these are rights to live naturally, reproduce their species, seek nutrition and bodily sustenance from Earth’s bounty, and maintain the integrity of their habitats (136). Hart justifiably lauds the inclusion of some of these rights in the Earth Charter, the drafting of which was sparked by the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development in 1987.

In the chapter on injustice in the third part of his book, Hart is at his best distinguishing suffering from natural disasters and from evil human acts. He brilliantly uses the Book of Job as the foundation for this discussion as he grapples with the problem of innocent suffering in the presence of a loving a powerful God. Countering any inkling toward attributing human suffering to God’s punishment, Hart places suffering in an evolutionary context within which the Creator-Spirit brings the universe into existence and by *kenosis* grants it freedom to develop. Freedom granted by the Creator-Spirit includes the freedom for Earth to develop with its turbulent and violent weather phenomena as well as “its gentle rains that promote plant life and growth for farm and forest, and its living waters that nourish creatures of the land, air, and water”(176). Hart encourages people to reflect on the suffering they and other creatures experience and to discern “ultimate meaning in the vast and dynamic cosmos of which they a part” (176).

The fourth part is dedicated to the notion of Earth as the common ground within which humans exercise their responsibility toward other creatures. He points to Jesus’ social teachings to have compassion for the poor, and he adapts the biblical Jubilee Year to the context of ecological degradation and environmental injustice. Jubilee understandings and practices, including rest for the land and its redistribution, would help “restore and conserve” regions that are ecologically integrated and “express appreciation for and advocate consciousness of the sacramental commons” where the Spirit is interactively present (197).

In the final two chapters, Hart provides guiding principles for concrete social projects that flow from a sacramental consciousness of Earth. His discernment process for making decisions about proposed projects in the sacramental commons is impressive. Drawing upon documents he drafted for the U.S. Catholic bishops of the Columbia River watershed, he lists twelve principles for Christian social ethics that relate to creation (219-20). Among these are caring for the Earth commons that reveals the Spirit, respecting the intrinsic value of creation, respecting natural rights, prioritizing the common good over the individual, and maintaining inter-generational levels that are appropriate to the carrying capacity

of Earth commons. He pleads for ethical behavior as a response to the call of the Spirit: "To be called by the Spirit is to be called to service in the commons and for the common good" (232).

Hart is humble about his text. He offers it for consideration and further development by others, invites people to deliberate on the sacramental consciousness and social vision he presents, and encourages them to develop this vision in their contexts.

Sacramental Commons fits well within Roman & Littlefield's Nature's Meaning Series that Roger Gottlieb edits. Hart's text is well suited for upper division undergraduates and for graduate students who are beginning to study environmental ethics from a theological perspective.

Embellishing Hart's effort is an insightful foreword by liberation theologian Leonardo Boff and an afterward by historian of culture Thomas Berry. Berry finds in *Sacramental Commons* "a substantial contribution" to the "Great Work" that he and others have begun to restore humans to the consciousness of their interrelatedness to Earth and to orient their activities to living harmoniously with one another, other species, and the planet's functioning. I agree wholeheartedly with Berry.

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