

7-1-2018

Book Review of *The Cosmic Common Good:  
Religious Grounds for Ecological Ethics*/ by Daniel P.  
Scheid

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*The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 98, No. 3 (July 2018): 421-423. [DOI](#). This article is ©University of Chicago Press and permission has been granted for this version to appear in [e-Publications@Marquette](#). University of Chicago Press does not grant permission for this article to be further copied/distributed or hosted elsewhere without the express permission from University of Chicago Press.

Book Reviews

Scheid, Daniel P. *The Cosmic Common Good: Religious Grounds for Ecological Ethics*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. vi+248 pp. \$29.95 (cloth).

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Aiming to contribute to “the preservation, sustainability, and well-being” (xi) of the Earth community from a theological perspective, Daniel P. Scheid examines discourse about the cosmic common good in the Catholic literature as a basis for ecological ethics; identifies traditions in selective Hindu, Buddhist, and Native American religions for parallel thinking; and proffers an expanded understanding of the Catholic cosmic common good that is responsive to ecological degradation and capable of stimulating actions that facilitate the flourishing of Earth. The associate professor of theology at Duquesne University accomplishes his goal in two parts, following the practices of comparative theology exemplified by Francis X. Clooney, SJ, and James Fredericks.

In the six chapters that comprise the first part of *The Cosmic Common Good*, Scheid focuses on the bases for a cosmic common good that are found in some Catholic, Christian primary sources and explored in secondary literature. Among them are classical theologians Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas on the nature and valuing of God's vast creation, the genre of Catholic social thought within which Scheid incorporates teachings

by recent popes on the moral dimensions of ecological degradation, and reflections on the scientific story of the universe by the self-characterized “geologist” Thomas Berry, CP. Berry’s influence permeates the monograph, and Scheid is particularly adept at bringing to the forefront the contributions Berry and paleontologist-mystic Teilhard de Chardin, SJ, make to a Catholic worldview that grounds ecological ethics.

Though valuing the cosmos remains constant throughout Scheid’s book, he primarily addresses attitudes and actions of humans as constituents of Earth who should recognize their interdependence with other living and inanimate members of the Earth community and should function cooperatively with them for their mutual flourishing. His exploration of the concept of Earth solidarity in Catholic social thought and his extension of traditional thinking about human rights to Earth rights are especially contributory to theological discourse.

To advance Earth solidarity, Scheid thoughtfully proposes nine dimensions that should stimulate human thinking about acting in cooperation with all entities that constitute our planetary home for our mutual good. Among these dimensions are solidarity as an attitude of moral responsibility for perpetuating the human “relatedness and ecological interdependence” with all constituents of Earth, as a moral virtue that Catholics should develop within themselves, as an expression of concern for vulnerable people and species, and as a demonstration of human dignity (93–100). His insightful explanation and careful expansion of human rights to Earth rights conclude with eleven rights that should be embraced and advocated. They include Earth’s right to exist in the cosmos, the rights of animate and inanimate creatures to act and interact according to their natures, and the rights of degraded ecosystems to be restored, of wild habitats to be free from human occupation, and of domesticated creatures to be treated as human companions in life who are free from “unnecessary human experimentation, cruelty, and abuse” (113–15).

Scheid’s astute specification of Earth rights and dimensions of Earth solidarity warrant serious consideration and discernment about how to act in particular circumstances. They also warrant action by Catholics individually and collectively at various levels of governance.

In the second part of *The Cosmic Common Good*, Scheid provides a succinct overview of the emerging field of comparative theology as a prelude to establishing a method for testing the Catholic cosmic common good, Earth solidarity, and Earth rights with Hindu, Buddhist, and American Indian traditions. Scholars who are unfamiliar with comparative theology will find in his discussion a helpful understanding of its key features—dialogical, dialectical, constructive, and attentive to details and differences.

Scheid demonstrates these key features in three chapters in which he examines sequentially Hindu dharmic traditions, Buddhist understandings of the interdependence of all living and nonliving entities, and the worldview and traditions of the Lakota division of the Sioux. In each chapter, he engages primary sources of the religion and secondary sources written by their scholar-adherents who serve as his dialogue partners in identifying helpful ways of thinking about the cosmic common good. Each chapter concludes with implications the traditions and reflections thereon have for enriching reflections on the Catholic cosmic common good, promoting practices of Earth solidarity, and advocating the rights of Earth and her constituents.

Particularly impressive and compelling is Scheid’s examination of the Lakota worldview and traditions for parallel thinking that are helpful when striving to construct a meaningful way of thinking about the Catholic cosmic common good. Agreeing with scholars who have criticized the Christian tradition for failing to engage the perspectives of oppressed people and conscious of Native American and other indigenous people who “have been closest to embodying and living out an implicit awareness of ecological connectedness and human responsibility” (164), Scheid approaches Lakota sources with humility as an “economically privileged” member of “the community of ‘overconsumers’” who have imperiled Earth. He insists that the “history of how Lakota and other indigenous peoples lived on Earth makes them a privileged voice to listen to and to learn from” (164). From the Lakota sweat lodge ritual Scheid learns the Lakota solidarity with the land, one another, and all

creatures—living and inanimate—as “kin,” their nonhierarchical understanding of the world, their “sense of responsibility to the land and to all creatures who dwell in it,” and their empowerment “to pursue balance and to honor the reciprocity among creatures” (170–71). There is a “lifeway” in the land to which they are attached and for which they recognize their responsibility (176). Scheid proffers compelling reasons for a similar way of life for Catholics who embrace the Catholic cosmic common good.

*The Cosmic Common Good* will be a fine addition to academic libraries and highly appropriate for use in undergraduate courses on ethics, ecological studies, world religions, and comparative religions. The mix of primary and secondary sources Scheid engages competently provide excellent beginnings for scholarly research. Also helpful for advancing research are his informative endnotes, extensive bibliography, and index.