

Reviews

Sacramental Commons: Christian Ecological Ethics. By JOHN HART. New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006. 248 pages. \$82.50 (\$29.95 paper).

Building upon biblical, traditional Christian, and Native American spiritualities, 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, abiotica, 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. Although abundant evidence attests to human interference with this goal, Hart maintains that persons 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 needed 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 his experience using a multidisciplinary approach toward 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 informative, insightful, and inspiring. The text is divided into four parts, each with three chapters in which Hart supports his thesis with a diversity of sources. He relies heavily on biblical and other texts for their deep meaning today in our age of widespread ecological degradation. His theological and ethical reflections are informed by broad contemporary scientific findings that yield cogent discourse on his topic. Although his forte is 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 American and nature spiritualities.

Creation is the subject of the first part of this illuminating book. 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 throughout creation, he insists, as he explores its sacramental character from the perspective of visionaries 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. Affinities that Francis of Assisi has with Lakota Sioux elder and healer Black Elk and with Muskogee Creek elder and healer Phillip Deere are explored. Like Francis, these two acclaimed Native Americans communed with the Spirit in the world, were committed to compassion for the poor and oppressed in their various biological and social communities, valued them for their intrinsic value, and demonstrated a sense of kinship with nonhuman creatures. Signs of the Spirit continue to be seen by people of various cultures, Hart contends, and recognizing these signs constitutes a sacramental consciousness that can inspire people to view human and nonhuman others as their relatives and to seek their well-being in the community of life. Without a sacramental vision of this kind, Hart cautions, “people will perish” (p. xxv).

In a reality check with a wider vision of the literature by and about religious visionaries, Hart recognizes Francis’ occasional negation of creation when prioritizing the human quest for eternal life and anticipating that Jesus would save humans from the physical world (p. 37). That humans are integral to Earth with other species and the abiotic environment is a scientifically informed understanding on which the author insists astutely, 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 other species with whom they share space and pursue their mutual good. Several helpful principles for promoting the common good are proffered (p. 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 (such as Bogotá, Colombia, and Indianapolis, Indiana) that have assured the accessibility of potable water to people in their communities as their human and natural right (pp. 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” (pp. 109–10).

Community relationships is the focus of the third part. Hart covers relations within the human community, between humans and the rest of the biotic community, and between creation and the Creator Spirit. He recognizes both collaborative and competitive relations among species in the biotic community as well as their dependence on the abiotic environment (air, land, and water) for their survival. While all have intrinsic value in themselves as essential constituents of the sacramental commons, he observes, some are instruments to others, particularly in predator-prey relationships. Yet, as Hart stresses in his introduction, intrinsic value “precedes, endures through, and is greater than their instrumental value” (p. xxiv). He promotes the codification of laws that expand the natural

rights of humans to include other species and abiota. 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 (pp. 131–36). 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 this third part of his book, Hart is at his best distinguishing suffering from natural disasters and from evil human acts. He brilliantly uses the biblical book of Job as the foundation for this discussion as he grapples with the problem of innocent suffering in the presence of a loving and 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 grants it freedom to develop. The freedom granted by the Creator-Spirit includes the ability of Earth to develop itself from turbulent and violent weather phenomena as well as "its gentle rains that promote plant life and growth for farm and forest," and "living waters that nourish creatures of the land, air, and water" (p. 176). Hart encourages readers to reflect on the suffering they and other creatures experience and to discern "ultimate meaning in the vast and dynamic cosmos of which they are a part" (p. 176).

Part four is dedicated to understanding Earth as the common ground within which humans exercise their responsibility toward other creatures. Hart points to Jesus' social teachings on having compassion for the poor and adapts the biblical Jubilee Year to the context of ecological degradation and environmental injustice today. Jubilee understandings and practices, including rest for the land and its redistribution, would help "restore and conserve" biological regions and "express appreciation for and advocate consciousness of the sacramental commons" where the Spirit is interactively present (p. 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 from documents he drafted for the United States Catholic bishops of the Columbia River watershed, he lists twelve principles for Christian social ethics that relate to creation. 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 intergenerational levels that are appropriate to the carrying capacity of Earth commons (pp. 219–20). 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" (p. 232).

Hart is humble about his fine text. He offers it for consideration and further development by others, invites readers 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 Rowan and Littlefield's Nature's Meaning Series that Roger Gottlieb edits. Hart's text is well suited for upper-division undergraduates and for graduate students beginning to study environmental ethics from a theological perspective.

Embellishing Hart's effort is an insightful Foreword by liberation theologian Leonardo Boff and an Afterword by historian of culture Thomas Berry. Berry finds in *Sacramental Commons* "a substantial contribution" to the "Great Work" that he and others have begun in order 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.

JAME SCHAEFER
 Department of Theology
 Marquette University
 115 Coughlin Hall
 Milwaukee WI 53201-1880
 schaeferj@marquette.edu

From Human to Posthuman: Christian Theology and Technology in a Postmodern World. By BRENT WATERS. Ashgate Science and Religion Series, ed. Roger Trigg and J. Wentzel van Huyssteen. Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2006. 166 pages. \$29.95.

Brent Waters is Associate Professor of Christian Social Ethics at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary in Evanston, Illinois. He received a D.Phil. from the University of Oxford in 2000. As the current director of the Stead Center for Ethics and Values, his "principal interests are in the areas of social and political thought, and the relationship between theology and technology" (seminary faculty Web page, www.garrett.edu). He has completed several projects focusing on embryonic and reproductive technologies.

This work is a 2006 addition to the Ashgate Science and Religion Series edited by Roger Trigg and J. Wentzel van Huyssteen. Waters's manuscript proceeds in three primary movements. In chapters 1 through 3, Waters investigates the arguments and claims made by posthuman and transhuman researchers and scholars, including N. Katherine Hayes, Ray Kurzweil, Hans Moravec, and John Rawls. In chapter 4, he aims to show why the "postmodern" theologies articulated by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Philip Hefner, Gordon Kaufman, and Arthur Peacocke fail to adequately respond to posthumanism. In chapters 5 and 6, he claims that a robust Christology and eschatology provide a more effective platform for engaging posthumanism.

Chapter 1, "The Late Modern Landscape," traces the import of religion and science for the culture of the time. Waters weaves a narrative on the influence of religion and science on culture and morality from the Enlightenment through Modernity to Postmodernity. He highlights two cultural shifts. The first is the shift from "providence to progress" (p. 2) beginning in the Enlightenment. This shift is marked by a decline in religion's cultural currency and the rise of scientific discourse resulting in a "dichotomy between private belief and public reason" (p. 10). The second shift is the move from progress to process. From the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, modern progress took center stage by improving technology, living conditions, and health. Religion became the arbiter