

John Hart. *Sacramental Commons: Christian Ecological Ethics*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006. xxv, 248 pages.

It was as an environmental studies undergraduate in 1982 that I was first introduced to Lynn White's indictment of Christianity as primarily responsible for our worsening environmental woes, a pivotal essay whose fortieth anniversary we celebrated last year (Lynn White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155 (1967): 1203–07). I loved White's essay. It confirmed my environmental passions and laid the blame for our Earth's plight squarely on the religion I had rejected. In Wendell Berry's words, courtesy of White, "the culpability of Christianity in the destruction of the natural world and uselessness of Christianity in any effort to correct that destruction are now established clichés of the conservation movement" (Wendell Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community* [New York: Pantheon, 1994], p. 93).

White's thesis continues to have much supporting evidence. A Baptist church in Boise, Idaho, prints and distributes this bumper sticker: "Forget 'Save the Earth'; What about your soul? The earth is going to burn, What about you?" showing concern about a different sort of global warming. Then there is Calvin Beisner, conservative Presbyterian theologian and global warming denier. Pressed by Bill Moyers in his October 2006 PBS special *Is God Green?* whether he worried that he might be wrong about global warming, Beisner said that global warming, even if real, is of little importance compared to how one is "going to live [in either heaven or hell for] eternity" ([http://www.pbs.org/moyers/moyersonamerica/print/isgodgreen\\_transcript\\_print.html](http://www.pbs.org/moyers/moyersonamerica/print/isgodgreen_transcript_print.html)). It is hard to have much concern about this planet's fate if you are convinced God will make a new one soon.

Notwithstanding sentiments like Beisner's or the Baptist bumpersticker, the last forty years have been a rich period of eco-theological reflection within Christianity, stimulated in large part as an attempted rebuttal to White. Adding to this forty-year period of reflection is theologian John Hart's book, *Sacramental Commons: Christian Ecological Ethics*. It comes highly recommended. Famed liberation theologian Leonardo Boff writes a laudatory forward (p. xi). Thomas Berry writes an approving afterword (p. 235). E. O. Wilson gives admiring praise (reprinted at <http://www.amazon.com/gp/pdp/profile/APV2F4630HV35>). For anyone acquainted with the main themes of eco-theological reflection over the last three decades, much here will be familiar. This is not a weakness. Any such book must re-articulate the key insights of recent theorizing. Hart's original (in the opinion of Boff) contribution in this book is the way he reworks the idea of *sacrament* as a new metaphor for the created order. Playing on Augustine's concept of sacraments as "visible forms of invisible grace," Hart begins, and lays out his key metaphysical assumptions, as follows:

A *sacred* place is a place made holy by an active and relational divine presence. Creation is sacred because it is the dynamic realization of divine imagination and the locus of divine immanence. A *sacramental* place is a place that reveals signs of the

transcendent and immanent creating Spirit. . . . All places are sacred because all creation is present in and to the Creator. . . . [Thus, all] places can become sacramental to people who see signs of the Spirit in them. . . . (p. xiii, emphasis in the original)

This passage from the opening page is, to a large extent, a summary of the book, namely, understanding creation as sacrament and sacrament as creation. Tillich half a century earlier theorized in a similar vein: “The power and meaning of nature must be sought within and through its objective physical structure. . . . If nature is interpreted in this realistic and, at the same time, historical way, natural objects can become bearers of transcendent power and meaning, they can become sacramental elements” (Paul Tillich, “Nature and Sacrament,” in *The Protestant Era* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957], pp. 101–02). Thus, Hart’s approach is not entirely new, but it is a fresh update, one likely to be especially attractive to those Christians in the liturgical traditions where the sacraments play a regular and central role in Christian worship.

White closed his essay with the proposal of Saint Francis “as a patron saint for ecologists,” suggesting that Francis “tried to substitute the idea of the equality of all creatures, including man, for the idea of man’s limitless rule of creation” (p. 1207). Early in his book, Hart questions whether Francis is really the exemplar that we need. Noting that one “of the factors that historically has limited Christian relatedness to and care for Earth has been its focus on a heavenly afterlife,” Hart declares that according to Francis, people are “called to discipline strictly and even disparage their body in its present, corporeal, earthly setting, and to develop a spiritual life that would enable the soul to enjoy a future life in heaven” (pp. 34–35). Thus, Hart argues that while Francis believed that “God’s presence permeates creation . . . , the sacred nature of Earth is not intrinsic but derived from its relation to the Creator.” (p. 31).

Hart argues in a different direction. He calls the metaphysical system he develops a “*creatiocentric* consciousness. . . [that is an] *ecocentric* (interrelational) perspective” (pp. 17–18). He describes this system as “a holistic understanding that the Creator, abiotic creation, and the biotic community are interrelated.” He squarely situates his system within contemporary scientific understandings of the cosmos, perhaps explaining Wilson’s appreciation:

Human history is inextricably linked with evolutionary ecology. Humans emerged relatively recently in the approximately 3.5-billion-year history of life on Earth, and they are genetically tied to all life, across the globe and through time, in a web of relationship. Indeed, humans are tied to all the created universe, as complexified stardust whose origins lie in the singular point of cosmic emergence some 14 billion years ago. . . . A *creatiocentric* focus inspires or even impels people to be committed to caring for and about the Spirit’s unfolding creation, working with the Spirit and with cosmic rhythms and rules. It keeps people mindful that the Creator Spirit is a Creating Spirit . . . exercised in cosmic and coevolutionary conversation with the constraints of ongoing laws of the universe, but with openness to influences and changes caused by contingent events and apparently chaotic events in unanticipated moments. (p. 18)

Following naturally from the forgoing, and against those philosophers who reject it, Hart unapologetically argues for the *intrinsic value* of all creation: "Intrinsic values are autonomous, not anthropogenic; they are present whether or not humans are present to acknowledge them, whether or not humans acknowledge them when humans are present, and whether or not humans think that they assign them" (p. 124). Further, "If each creature and all creation were regarded as having intrinsic value, the amount and extent of environmental devastation and species extinction would be reduced" (p. 137). Hart is articulating, in essence, a Christian version of deep ecology, another ecocentric, intrinsic value system.

Consistent with his intrinsic value, creatiocentric perspective, Hart negatively critiques the stewardship model of Christian environmental ethics that is perhaps the most widespread among Christian environmental ethicists. This model recognizes creation as the rightful possession of a transcendent God merely entrusted to humans for wise use. Hart argues that while this model has been "a corrective against those who regard 'private property' as an absolute right . . . , at its core 'stewardship' is still an anthropocentric concept with cultural and practical shortcomings." Instead, Hart argues for what he calls an ethic of *relation*, "an attitude of reciprocal responsibility for Earth, Earth's goods, Earth's creatures, and Earth's places, in a context of human species' engagement with and interdependence among other Earth beings" (p. 120).

Reconciling the chaos and contingency in cosmic processes with an omnipotent God, Hart refers to *kenosis* whereby the Creator voluntarily engaged in a "relinquishing of coercive power over the creatures that result from the interaction of law, contingency, and time" (p. 17). This idea was well developed by process theologian John Haught in his book *God after Darwin: A Theology of Evolution* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 2000), pp. 109–11. Indeed, Hart's book throughout has a process theology feel, à la Whitehead, Hartshorne, John B. Cobb, Jr., and Haught. Yet, except for the passing remark that "Creation is in process" (p. xiv), the words *process theology* never appear, and no reference to process theologians is anywhere made.

This may be a strength. I have encountered a number of clerics from the mainline denominations that bemoan their forced encounter with the often jargon laden writings of process theology in seminary, Whitehead especially, and forswear any interest in process thought. Whether or not this was his aim, Hart gives his readers an encounter with process thought unencumbered with obtuse jargon and the somewhat heretical connotations and associations the term *process theology* carries in some Christian circles, especially conservative ones. Process theology is attractive to many exactly because of its perceived compatibility with the current scientific understanding of the cosmos as an evolving *process*. It is condemned by others for exactly the same reason. In Hart's book, readers can encounter process thought freed of those connotations. If they resonate with this way of imagining theology and ethics and they later recognize the parallel with process thought, perhaps they will be less susceptible to the attacks of process theology's detractors.

What kind of ethics emerges from the metaphysical foundation Hart lays? Unsurprisingly, ecocentric ones. Indeed, Hart cites Aldo Leopold's famous formulation: "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise" (p. 210). Hart then declares, in a surprising welcome, and accurate reversal of usual definitions, that society must enable the "prosecution of *ecoterrorists*—those whose individual and corporate greed cause pollution of air, land, and water" (p. 210). When he turns to social ethics, Hart is explicitly biblical, citing Matthew 25's call to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, heal the sick, and otherwise tend to the "least of these." These ethics mirror those articulated by the process thinkers and other Christian eco-theologians such as Thomas Berry and Matthew Fox.

As a materialist, I nevertheless find in process theology an interesting and, in my judgment, the most plausible reconciliation between modern scientific understandings of the cosmos and traditional Christian metaphysics. (But see Lisa H. Sideris, *Environmental Ethics, Ecological Theology, and Natural Selection* [New York: Columbia University Press, 2003], for the argument that process theologians do not really take the random element of evolution seriously). Hart is to be thanked for providing a new, useful, beautifully written exposition of process thought and the ethical outlook that flows from it, blessedly unencumbered by the jargon that is sometimes found among the process thinkers. Hart has written an accessible book for the general reader laying out a framework for understanding our place in the cosmos in harmony with science and a new articulation of a Christian ethical system capable of addressing our accelerating planetary crisis. In a world where one in three humans are Christian, such a book is a welcome addition to ongoing ethical reflections.

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