

ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

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Catholicism, with other religions, continues the critical grounding of ecological concern within its tradition. Contemporary theologians offer varying approaches to environmental ethics, from ecologically sensitive Christian humanism to a more radical repositioning of the human person within a creation charged with inherent value. A common emphasis is the connection between ecological damage and social justice. Although specific norms have been difficult to formulate, this partial gap has been filled by strong contributions using aesthetic, spiritual, and narrative approaches.

SHORTLY BEFORE HIS DEATH IN 1948, U.S. ecologist, forester, and environmentalist Aldo Leopold penned this lament:

Obligations have no meaning without conscience, and the problem we face is the extension of the social conscience from people to the land. No important change in ethics was ever accomplished without an internal change in our intellectual emphasis, loyalties, affections, and convictions. The proof that conservation has not yet touched these foundations of conduct lies in the fact that . . . religion [has] not yet heard of it.¹

Some 60 years later, we can say that religion has indeed heard of conservation in Leopold's sense, meaning harmony between humans and the land. Roger Gottlieb's recent, impressive compendium of religious ecological concern documents its global range and variety.² He describes the situation this way: "Religious environmentalism is a diverse, vibrant, global

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¹ Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac: With Essays on Conservation from Round River* (1949; New York: Ballantine, 1970) 246.

² Roger Gottlieb, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology* (New York: Oxford, 2006). This large volume contains contributions from representatives of the major religions and spiritual traditions of the world. It also explores a number of intersecting issues, such as population, genetic engineering, and the treatment of animals. Finally, it explores different aspects of religious environmental activism.

movement, a rich source of new ideas, institutional commitment, political activism, and spiritual inspiration.”³ Christian, including Catholic, environmentalism shares all these dimensions. The work of the World Council of Churches continues,⁴ the Eastern Orthodox have a “green Patriarch” in Bartholomew I,⁵ and the Vatican as well as regional bishops’ conferences regularly address environmental issues.⁶ This journal has itself published actively in this area over the past six years, most notably Jame Schaefer’s two major contributions grounding esthetic and ethical valuation of nature in historical theology as translated into our contemporary context.⁷ Additionally, a variety of recent articles explore nuanced dimensions of the doctrine of creation as it relates to the Trinity, God’s action in the world, and eschatology.⁸

Christian environmentalism did not reach its current, vibrant state, however, without some unanesthetized prodding of the tradition by Lynn White some 40 years ago.⁹ Being accused of not paying attention is one thing; being held culpable for planetary devastation is another. White charged that Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion in the world (true, I think, although not necessarily ecologically damning); that Christianity is significantly responsible for the environmental crisis (partly true, but overlooks what seems to be a general human tendency toward ecological damage); and that for a Christian, a tree, or any other nonhuman element of nature, can be no more than a bare fact (untrue on biblical and sacramental grounds). But O happy, if partly unfair, attack! Christianity began to take notice.

This Note attempts to take a reading of the present state of Catholic environmental ethics. To do so, I will take a core sample from three major contributions to Catholic environmental ethics in the last five years: David

³ Roger Gottlieb, *A Greener Faith: Religious Environmentalism and Our Planet's Future* (New York: Oxford, 2006) 215.

⁴ See Gottlieb’s summary, *ibid.* 106–7, 125–26.

⁵ Gottlieb recounts Patriarch Bartholomew’s 1997 condemnation of human-caused ecological destruction. *Ibid.* 83–84.

⁶ *Ibid.* 85–95.

⁷ Jame Schaefer, “Appreciating the Beauty of the Earth,” *Theological Studies* 62 (2001) 23–51; and “Valuing Earth Intrinsically and Instrumentally: A Theological Framework for Environmental Ethics,” *Theological Studies* 66 (2005) 783–814.

⁸ Ilia Delio, O.S.F., “Is Creation Eternal?” *Theological Studies* 66 (2005) 279–303; Gloria Schaab, “A Procreative Paradigm of the Creative Suffering of the Triune God: Implications of Arthur Peacocke’s Evolutionary Theology,” *Theological Studies* 67 (2006) 542–66; Denis Edwards, “Resurrection and the Costs of Evolution: A Dialogue with Rahner on Noninterventionist Theology,” *Theological Studies* 67 (2006) 816–33.

⁹ Lynn White, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” *Science* 155 (1967) 1203–7.

Hollenbach's *The Common Good and Christian Ethics*,¹⁰ John Hart's *Sacramental Commons*,¹¹ and Susan Ross's *For the Beauty of the Earth*.¹² Each represents a particular type of achievement and a distinct approach within the field; as such, each complements and implicitly raises critical questions for the others. Hollenbach, a Catholic humanist, approaches environmental issues as an area of applied social ethics, exploring how our ecological interdependence impacts the human good. Hart takes a more experimental, radical approach, springboarding from Catholic sacramentality to a wider "creatiocentric" spirituality. Ross, a Catholic feminist, explores natural, human, and divine beauty through the lens of theological esthetics.

After examining these three works in some detail, I discuss the shape of Catholic environmental ethics, in particular the difficulties it seems to have at the level of specific principles and norms. Whether Catholic environmental ethics coalesces around a new and distinct set of principles in the manner of Catholic social teaching, Catholic biomedical ethics, or the just war tradition is yet to be seen. The absence of an effective body of norms can be a source of frustration, both intellectually and practically, although it is mitigated to some extent by the helpful application of preexisting norms from Catholic social teaching to environmental issues. At present, Catholic environmental ethics does not have its own distinct set of norms mediating between its deeper theological foundations and the specificity of concrete situations. However, the development of the Christian ecological conscience continues through multifaceted work on both the theoretical and practical levels.

QUESTIONS OF GOODNESS

Hollenbach approaches environmental issues through a retrieval of the classical Aristotelian-Thomist notion of the common good and its extension to our contemporary global context. He argues against political philosophies rooted in individualism and relativism, for they fail to address the ways in which human beings are, and should be, connected to each other. "An issue such as the protection of the global environment points to ways that the good of one country and good of the larger world are intertwined or, in the long run, even identical."¹³

How then, specifically, to understand the role of ecological interdependen-

¹⁰ David Hollenbach, S.J., *The Common Good and Christian Ethics* (New York: Cambridge, 2002).

¹¹ John Hart, *Sacramental Commons: Christian Ecological Ethics* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).

¹² Susan A. Ross, *For the Beauty of the Earth: Women, Sacramentality, and Justice* (New York: Paulist, 2006).

¹³ Hollenbach, *Common Good* 48.

dence in the common good? Hollenbach lays out three contemporary understandings of what societies share in common, each of which falls short of the classical understanding of common good. “General welfare” and “public interest” both refer to aggregate individual goods, these being, respectively, economic well-being and individual rights. “Public goods” go further, identifying those that all can share without competition, such as clean air or water. Yet the goods at stake for all three “are largely seen as extrinsic or external to the relationships that exist among those who form the community or society in question.”¹⁴ What becomes clear in his text is that, although the environment is a shared, public good, it is not an internal, fundamental part of the common good.

In the more classical version, the “shared good is immanent within the relationships that bring this community or society into being.”¹⁵ The commonality here is not merely the “summing” or sharing of extrinsic goods, but rather a form of participatory activity that in fact constitutes the community or society in question. In the case of a family, this activity would be the bonds of affection that hold the family together; in the case of an Aristotelian polis, it would be “reciprocal interaction among citizens” as they debated how to live together.¹⁶ So “the good of relationships with others is realized in the interactive activities of communication and love that are distinct capacities of persons.”¹⁷ Examples include sharing a meal, maintaining a home, earning an education, intellectual exchange, and friendship, which “are not merely extrinsic means to human flourishing but are aspects of flourishing itself.”¹⁸

Hollenbach explicitly contrasts this good with those attainable by non-human beings. “Non-personal beings such as rocks, plants, and non-human animals . . . can form collectivities whose members are in coordinated interaction with each other,” but not communities that require self-conscious communication and mutuality.¹⁹ Therefore “the common good of public life is a realization of the human capacity for intrinsically valuable relationships, not only a fulfillment of the needs and deficiencies of individuals.”²⁰ So “a key aspect of the common good can be described as *the good of being a community at all*—the good realized in the mutual relationships in and through which human beings achieve their well-being.”²¹ Hollen-

¹⁴ Ibid. 8.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid. 81.

²⁰ Ibid. 81.

¹⁵ Ibid. 9.

¹⁷ Ibid. 80.

¹⁹ Ibid. 131.

²¹ Ibid. 82; emphasis original.

bach's vision of the common good is one of human persons acting together, reciprocally, in freedom and in respect for one another's dignity.

For Hollenbach, the natural environment is an important part of the common good broadly considered, providing "common goods and common bads," yet it does not enter into the heart of what he understands as the common good. Nature is a means to the fulfillment of human needs, but it is not connected to human flourishing in the fullest sense. Nature is also a stage upon which uniquely human activity is played out and is thus at best akin to "the public good of the architecture of the forum where they [the Athenians] conducted their debates."²² As such, his approach is an environmentally attuned Christian humanism, an ecologically enlightened anthropocentrism. It applies a preexisting principle of humanist Catholic morality to questions of ecological interdependence.

Hollenbach's major contribution to Catholic environmental ethics is indirect, addressing the underlying sociopolitical framework within which it must function. By advancing such a refined and thoroughly defended version of what many thought to be an archaic idea, Hollenbach contributes to an emerging communitarian direction that is crucial in our current global context. In so doing, he establishes a baseline level at which environmental concerns can be coherently addressed. Moreover, as I will show below, his sophisticated understanding of the role religion can play in supporting and shaping the common good has significant implications for how religiously motivated environmentalism, including versions more radical than his own, enter into discussion of the common good.

Using Gottlieb's categories, Hollenbach represents an institutionally aligned, politically important contribution. Indeed, the ongoing work of bishops' conferences and the Vatican itself bears this out.²³ Both his and their work represent a maturation of environmental ethics into a position of prominence within Catholic social ethics. But, we may still ask, is an environmentally sensitive Christian humanism a sufficient approach? This brings us to questions of truth.

QUESTIONS OF TRUTH

Is it true, as Hollenbach seems to suggest, that only intrahuman relationships have inherent value? Is it true that our relationship to nature

²² Ibid. 9.

²³ For a helpful survey of official Catholic teachings on the environment, including the Columbia River Watershed letter and recent Vatican statements on the global water crisis, see John Hart, "Catholicism," in *Oxford Handbook* 65–91. See also the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Faithful Stewards of God's Creation—A Catholic Resource for Environmental Justice" (2007), <http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/ejp/climate/index.shtml> (accessed November 3, 2007).

cannot be woven internally into our understanding of the common good? Is it not possible, at least from a religious perspective, to see our relationship to nature as a truly reciprocal one, via the mediation of God? Whereas Hollenbach sees a morally constructed common good, John Hart sees a spiritually infused sacramental commons, itself set within a sacramental cosmos. “A *sacramental universe* is the totality of creation infused with the visionary, loving, creative, and active power of the Spirit’s transcendent-immanent and creating presence. A *sacramental commons* is creation as a moment and locus of human participation in the interactive presence and caring compassion of the Spirit.”²⁴

Within this vision, Hart recognizes, along with Hollenbach, that there is a uniquely human bond, a distinctively *human commons*.²⁵ And with Hollenbach, he defines ecojustice as “the act of linking responsibility for the natural world with responsibility for the neighbor. The good of the revelatory commons and the common good of the revelatory poor are inseparable.”²⁶ But beyond Hollenbach, Hart’s sacramental commons envisions true community, not merely causal interdependence, with the natural world. We can attain “communion not only among humans but between humans and other creatures and between all life, Earth, and the creating immanent and transcendent Spirit.”²⁷ The sacramental commons is reciprocal: “Humans mediate the Spirit to nature. Similarly, the Spirit’s immanence is mediated by nature to humans.”²⁸ The human commons is just one of many concentric commons for Hart, who includes nature directly in the instrumental, intrinsic, and collective goods that comprise the common good.²⁹

Hart rejects the term “environmental ethics” as connoting a merely external relation, whereas “ecological ethics” connotes an internal connection. He argues that “anthropocentrism must be set aside and replaced by an awareness that all members of the biotic community have an inherent goodness and value that should be respected; that people should relate well to other creatures and share with them a common Earth home viewed as a commons; and that ‘common good’ understandings should be extended to non-human creation.”³⁰ Hart sees a direct relationship between vision and action, spirituality and ethics. “If people view the commons as sacramental, presenced by the Spirit . . . they should be inspired to treat their bioregion

²⁴ Hart, *Sacramental Commons* xviii.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 140.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 77.

²⁹ *Ibid.* 147.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 63.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 121.

³⁰ *Ibid.* 67–68.

with respect, to care for it responsibly, to seek signs of the Spirit in it, and to distribute its goods justly.”³¹

Clearly Hart represents a more radical approach to Catholic environmentalism than Hollenbach, fitting into Gottlieb’s “new ideas” dimension. But the extent of their differences is not fully clear. Let us grant, with Hollenbach, that relationships exclusively among nonpersons neither recognize inherent value nor constitute community in the human sense. The key question then becomes: what is the nature of the relationship between humans and nonhumans? Although qualitatively separating intrahuman from exclusively nonhuman relationships, Hollenbach has very little to say about what might go on between them.

As we have noted already, when Hollenbach does address the issue, he usually describes the relationship as extrinsic. This initially suggests that he simply disagrees with Hart on a philosophical and theological level. Perhaps our new ecological challenges do not merit significant theological expansion or revision. Writing out of the Reformed tradition, John Cooper makes such a case, critically engaging the adoption of the pantheist approach taken by Hart and so many others.³² In his *Panentheism: The Other God of the Philosophers*, Cooper performs a thorough historical and contemporary survey of philosophical and theological panentheism, then outlines why he is not a pantheist but rather retains a more classical approach.³³ Similarly Ernst Conradie, also drawing from the Reformed tradition, rejects attempts to revise Christian anthropology in terms of being “at home on earth.” While strongly supporting a Christian commitment to an ecologically informed lifestyle, he insists on the traditional eschatological proviso that we are not at home yet.³⁴ This approach seems comparable to Hollenbach’s Augustinian sense of our pilgrim status on earth.

Yet in a few places Hollenbach hints at a richer affirmation of the natural environment. He notes that for Thomas Aquinas, ultimate human fulfillment involves not only unity with God and neighbor but also with the whole created order,³⁵ and later he acknowledges that nonpersonal shared

³¹ Ibid. 77.

³² For a pantheist approach similar to Hart’s but working out of the Protestant tradition, see Sallie McFague, *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001).

³³ John W. Cooper, *Panentheism: The Other God of the Philosophers* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2006). See chapter 14, “Why I Am Not a Pantheist.”

³⁴ Ernst M. Conradie, *An Ecological Christian Anthropology: At Home on Earth?* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate 2005). Conradie construes our sense of belonging as more properly an eschatological longing for the kingdom.

³⁵ Hollenbach, *Common Good* 123.

good can be “intrinsically valuable.”³⁶ Unfortunately he never develops these ideas, and he tends to hold inherent value (is this different from intrinsic?) even closer to the anthropocentric vest than do official church documents.³⁷ But perhaps this contrast with ecclesial statements offers a clue for at least a partial complementarity between the two approaches.

In his book, Hollenbach operates intellectually at two levels. The first is as a Catholic social philosopher engaging the wider, pluralistic, public debate. The second is as a normative theologian making “properly religious and theological” arguments, as when he offers an Augustinian reading of the common good.³⁸ As a Catholic social philosopher, he must put claims forward with sensitivity to differences in worldview in the public square and the shared limits of public reason.³⁹ As a theologian, however, he may make “higher” claims for the nature of the common good. Hollenbach argues firmly that properly theological ideas can and should be brought to bear on the public common good with transformative effect. He argues equally strongly, however, that, when claims move from the properly theological domain back to the public domain, not only do they require arbitration by reasonable public criteria, but they should also be constrained for internal theological reasons. Specifically, given our eschatological status as still awaiting the fullness of God’s kingdom, we must always retain the distinction between the more limited, historically achievable, “terrestrial” good that Augustine recognized and the fullness of our ultimate hopes.⁴⁰ “In the civic life of terrestrial republics, therefore, different degrees of approximation to the full theological good are possible.”⁴¹ When and how they are pursued “calls for careful discernment.”⁴² And in all cases, respect for everyone’s mutual freedom will require abstinence from attempts to organize “all of society around a single integrating value scheme.”⁴³

The potential for combining Hollenbach and Hart, then, depends on

³⁶ Ibid. 131.

³⁷ The U.S. Catholic bishops affirmed in 1991 that “it is appropriate that we treat other creatures and the natural world not just as a means to human fulfillment but also as God’s creatures, possessing an independent value, worthy of our respect and care” (*Renewing the Earth: An Invitation to Reflection and Action in Light of Catholic Social Teaching* [Washington: USCC, 1991] 7). For a more recent statement to this effect, see Archbishop Celestino Migliore, Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations, “Catholic Faith Tradition of Stewardship,” section IV, a., given at the Catholic Conference of Ohio, April 14, 2007, http://www.ncrlc.com/Apostolic_Nuncio.html (accessed November 3, 2007).

³⁸ Hollenbach, *Common Good* 114.

³⁹ Ibid. 167.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 124.

⁴¹ Ibid. 128.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid. 115.

understanding these two distinct levels. Hart, on the whole, offers a spiritually “high” version of the ecological common good, whereas social philosopher Hollenbach lowers his sights to a more strictly rational, public version of environmental concern. Sensitive to the limits of what can be shared in terms of spiritual worldviews, a pluralistic common good might engage nature only as an external public good. That does not preclude, however, those who experience a sacramental commons from bringing their experience to the public discussion. This, then, opens the question of discerning the properly public role for Hart’s creatiocentric vision, an area in which Hollenbach may have some critical concerns.

Hart seems very aggressive in publicly promoting an explicitly spiritual version of the common good. His chapters 10 to 12 move from spiritual vision to a vast array of norms that seem to imply a command style of economic management and direct recourse to law. He bluntly places communal over individual good, without much nuance. Moreover, he characterizes himself as utopian, asserting that “absolute utopias . . . can be reached over time by the realization of relative utopias.”⁴⁴ At this point Hollenbach might ask whether Hart is making “the political sphere the bearer of counterfeit messianic hopes.”⁴⁵ Hollenbach offers a more complex, cautious, and nuanced approach than Hart for how to move from spirituality to social application.

Hart, of course, might object that such trimming of his spiritual sails shows timidity during this time of ecological crisis. Perhaps our context calls for a more directly prophetic role. More broadly, might there be enough shared interreligious concern for the environment to justify bringing spiritual considerations more directly into public play? Of particular relevance here is Hart’s move from personal and social spirituality, which he characterizes as a second level—that of distinct religious traditions—to a third, universal level of “spiritual experiences and understandings shared transculturally.”⁴⁶ Might issues of environmental ethics open out to more general, even universal spiritual concerns that can legitimately carry publicly relevant insight?⁴⁷

At various points in his book Hart explores and affirms the commonality

⁴⁴ Hart, *Sacramental Commons* 157.

⁴⁵ Hollenbach, *Common Good* 125.

⁴⁶ Hart, *Sacramental Commons* xxii.

⁴⁷ For an analysis of two attempts to forge a publicly persuasive global ethic through interreligious dialogue, see Sallie King, “A Global Ethic in Light of Comparative Religious Ethics,” in *Explorations in Global Ethics: Comparative Religious Ethics and Interreligious Dialogue*, ed. Sumner Twiss and Bruce Grelle (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 2000) 118–40. King analyzes Hans Küng’s effort in conjunction with the 1993 Parliament of the World’s Religions, as well as Leonard Swidler’s “Universal Declaration of a Global Ethic,” in *Theoria > Praxis: How Jews, Chris-*

of nature as a locus for spiritual experience across world religions and spiritual traditions. He notes that something akin to what Catholics would call a sacramental experience of creation has been present in some form "since the earliest human spiritual stirrings."⁴⁸ Some form of responsibility for creation has also been practiced in diverse traditions. Hart distinguishes between ecclesial and universal sacraments. The latter are mediated not by a church representative but rather "by creation in whole or in part."⁴⁹

At times Hart describes universal spirituality in measured terms, seeing ideas and symbols from various traditions as "complementary and at times congruent."⁵⁰ Ultimately, however, he asserts that, "when encountering divine presence, individuals in diverse settings from distinct cultures engage the same divine Being, but express their experience in different languages and with different symbols and stories."⁵¹ For Hart, religion is a particularized spirituality resting upon a deeper, more universal spiritual phenomenon.⁵² For him, Christian ecological ethics taps into a creation spirituality that is deeper than any specific tradition. The shared earth, for those with eyes to see, reveals our shared human spirituality. "All are interdependent and interrelated on *spiritual* common ground."⁵³

This universal spirituality, of course, raises thorny theological issues that cannot be adjudicated here. But on a practical level, Hart is trying to establish a deep, interreligious moral pull here. Perhaps there is a general spiritual obligation to care for the earth. Our obligation to the earth becomes a universal ought, not simply a particular preference. Indeed, one can read the book as an attempt to provide a general spiritual underpinning for the Earth Charter, which he discusses in some detail.⁵⁴

But how might a sacramental commons vision apply to a public environmental issue? Hart gives an effective example in his analysis of water. On one level, the global water crisis is a growing issue of distributive justice. When one adds a sacramental commons perspective, though, the analysis becomes even more profound. As a common good, water's function is destroyed when it is polluted or privatized for industrial and/or commercial purposes. But additionally, polluted water "no longer has a

tians, and Muslims Can Together Move from Theory to Practice, ed. Leonard Swidler (Leuven: Peeters, 1998) 14.

⁴⁸ Hart, *Sacramental Commons* 5.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 13.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 42.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 37.

⁵² For a provocative, systematic attempt to articulate a universal religious orientation, grounded in contemporary science, see Frederick Turner, *Natural Religion* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 2006).

⁵³ Hart, *Sacramental Commons* 142.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 153–57.

sacramental character as a sign in nature of the Creator Spirit.”⁵⁵ There is, then, both a moral failure of distribution and a spiritual loss. Pollution destroys water’s sign as part of the Creator’s artistry and solicitude for life; privatization compromises its sign-value in terms of God’s love for all. Various traditions, of course, might express the spiritual significance of water differently, but could there not be a general, publicly shared agreement that a violation has occurred on a spiritual level? Water itself, in its pure form—neither polluted nor privatized—has sacramental value, and the restoration of its purity thus becomes, when seen integrally, a political, moral, and spiritual act.

Hart’s *Sacramental Commons* represents an achievement of innovative integration. His creation-centered spirituality blends contemporary science, environmental philosophy, biblical and historical theology, Native American spirituality, and socio-political-economic analysis. Hart has a certain refreshing fearlessness,⁵⁶ as well as an urgency, that complement Hollenbach’s more intellectually cautious approach, and thus makes its own essential contribution to Catholic environmentalism.

QUESTIONS OF BEAUTY

Whereas Hart integrates a wide range of experiences into an overarching ecological spirituality, Ross integrates ecological spirituality into a wide range of other experiences. Ross’s 2006 Madeleva Lecture, *For the Beauty of the Earth: Women, Sacramentality, and Justice*, is an exploration of theological esthetics. Initially surprising is how little direct attention nature receives; it is a lecture about beauty first, and natural beauty as a part of that larger notion. On reflection, perhaps this rather understated treatment of nature indicates a quiet maturation within the field. Here we see natural beauty and, with it, environmental ethics integrated seamlessly into a larger picture—not simply as an area of application but rather as a constitutive dimension of theology. The recent studies by James Keenan on the works of mercy and by Paul Wadell on Christian virtue exhibit a similar characteristic.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Ibid. 80.

⁵⁶ For example, how many ecological theologians are willing to criticize St. Francis of Assisi? Rather than the usual encomium, Hart’s chapter, “The Spirit of St. Francis,” does not hesitate to distinguish elements of Francis’s theology and piety that he believes fail to carry over into our present context. See *ibid.* 23–40.

⁵⁷ For recent moral theology that weaves environmental concern into a wider moral framework, see James F. Keenan, S.J., *The Works of Mercy: The Heart of Catholicism* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005) 33–36; also Paul Wadell, *Happiness and the Christian Moral Life: An Introduction to Christian Ethics* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008) 213–15.

Is beauty, whether in nature or culture, “merely” esthetic? Solely a matter of subjective preference? Does beauty lack the gravity of truth and justice, merely adorning the surface of things? Ross answers no to these questions, as she retrieves the classical interrelationship among truth, goodness, and beauty. She examines beauty’s role across a seemingly eclectic collection of topics from personal appearance to its function in nature, from its theological history to its role in typically female church activities such as altar and rosary societies, from African-American women’s hats to the social life of African villages. Across these varied topics, Ross stitches a philosophy of beauty that holds the lecture together. In the process, she successfully uses scholarly concepts to enhance, rather than obscure, our perception of beauty in the earthy, common, and humble details of daily life.

It becomes difficult, after reading Ross’s work, to exclude the human relationship to nature, or the acropolis for that matter, from the inherent meaning of human flourishing. “Beauty is not an ‘add-on’ . . . it is, rather, partly constitutive of who we are.”⁵⁸ Ross refuses to seal off distinctively human activity from her surroundings, whether natural or cultural. Neither the creation nor the perception of real beauty is extrinsic to the human good. Surface levels of immediate pleasure or attractiveness, of course, can be merely extrinsic, but on further reflection, “beauty signifies a depth beyond its appearance.”⁵⁹

Ross proposes that when examined deeply, beauty discloses “an intrinsic generosity.”⁶⁰ She finds this generosity in all of beauty’s lived forms, from artwork to ideas, from persons to nature. “Real beauty does not exclude; rather, it invites. Real beauty does not ‘count up,’ but rather flings its gifts to anyone who asks. Real beauty invites exploration and depth; it does not shut the door prematurely to the questioner. Beauty is always ready to give more.”⁶¹

The moral and even spiritual ramifications of her proposal quickly become evident. Using the reflections of Elaine Scarry, Ross describes beauty’s capacity to “de-center” the self. “We cease to be the center of attention . . . our own vision is expanded through the beautiful thing we encounter.”⁶² As a result, we experience a proper humility before beauty, which positions us within a wider field of value. Rather than belittling us, this appropriate humility draws us into fuller life. The sense of “smallness” that comes before great art or natural beauty, for example, is also a condition

⁵⁸ Ross, *For the Beauty* 7.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* 28; emphasis original.

⁶² *Ibid.* 73.

for sensitivity to the equal importance of the needs of others. Here the link between beauty and goodness—virtue, more specifically—becomes clear. “The ability to appreciate beauty comes from a generous heart; indeed, beauty itself enlarges the heart.”⁶³ As Aquinas recognized, one can legitimately be “instructed ‘through sensible things’ . . . not only intellectually, but also morally and aesthetically.”⁶⁴ Such instruction engenders “a thoughtful sense of one’s place in the world and before God.”⁶⁵

In Ross’s approach, our interaction with beauty is no longer simply an external, public good, a setting for conducting the more weighty, inherently good activities such as friendship or politics. “Ultimately, beauty’s power to draw us in and beyond ourselves is a significant element—indeed, a necessary element—in our moral development.”⁶⁶ Beauty, including in its nonhuman form, can and does shape us intrinsically and, as such, becomes internal to human flourishing.

A theological interpretation of beauty flows naturally from here. “I would also venture, the beauty of the world gives us a sense of the care with which God holds us, a care that is attuned to our senses and to our, and God’s, delight.”⁶⁷ Beauty’s intrinsic generosity, be it in nature or culture, manifests the generosity of God, as so often seen in Jesus’ parables. “Real beauty both has and elicits generosity, and such generosity plays a central role in the Christian moral life.”⁶⁸ From a Christian perspective, the recognition and celebration of beauty becomes not merely a subjective preference but a moral imperative. “When we fail to acknowledge and appreciate beauty—our own, another’s, nature’s—we are failing to give glory to God. We are failing to love our neighbor as our self.”⁶⁹ In sum, “if . . . there is an intrinsic generosity in beauty, an openness, an invitation, then a theology of beauty that is incarnate and grows from our sense of beauty in the natural world is also a theology of generosity: to oneself and others.”⁷⁰

If real beauty is in fact intrinsically related to goodness, then it is part of the common good’s most basic level. Ross finds this powerfully illustrated in women’s activities within African communities. Among the Ndbele in South Africa, for example, women have a tradition of painting murals on their homes. It is “a part of their culture, a means of both self- and communal expression.”⁷¹ What is true for the Ndbele is true for other African

⁶³ Ibid. 30.

⁶⁵ Ibid. 79.

⁶⁷ Ibid. 5–6.

⁶⁹ Ibid. 31.

⁷¹ Ibid. 69.

⁶⁴ Ibid. 85.

⁶⁶ Ibid. 5.

⁶⁸ Ibid. 14.

⁷⁰ Ibid. 30.

women as well, as they regularly unite creativity and practicality in their homes, baskets, pots, or cloaks. Their works are pleasing to the eye, good for the community, and “embody the truth of the lives of these women.”⁷² Here truth, goodness, and beauty are interwoven.

Not so, sadly, in much of contemporary U.S. culture, where Ross finds beauty’s role to be harsh, elitist, and commodified. “It is only by de-centering ourselves that we are able both to see beauty and to share it, to make our world *both* beautiful and just. Without such a de-centering, we run the risk of elevating beauty above truth and goodness, making it a private and personal goal and failing to share it with others. When this happens, beauty becomes a possession, something bought and sold. . . . And it is no longer good.”⁷³

Ross provides an opportunity to integrate important aspects of the thought of both Hollenbach and Hart. She blends the former’s humanism with the latter’s insistence on nature’s inherent value. She offers a philosophical and theological account of how the human relation to the nonhuman can reach the heart of personhood and human community. The implication of Ross’s view, finally, is that “to choose between beauty and justice is a lose–lose situation . . . in the long run,” both socially and ecologically.⁷⁴

Ross’s view also generates critical perspectives on Hart, one supplementary and one more pointedly critical. Ross supplements Hart’s comparatively underdeveloped and implicit reliance on virtue. For Hart, sacramentality is not immediately disclosed, but rather requires what he terms a “relational consciousness.” This seems to be a kind of acquired virtue, a disposition to read persons, institutions, and nature such that transcendence and immanence become linked: “the sacrality of a place is visible only to those who use their physical and spiritual eyes to see beyond the immediately apparent.”⁷⁵ Given that he sees sacramental moments with the earth as increasingly rare, one might ask Hart for a fuller account of how one acquires this spiritual acuity. He speaks of openness as crucial,⁷⁶ but to receive spiritually from nature perhaps more is needed—perhaps some active internal formation and discipline. In this regard Ross’s more detailed account of how virtue is connected to the perception of and response to beauty is helpful.

A more critical question Ross might pose to Hart would concern his use of language. If “we are drawn to do the good because it is true and beau-

⁷² Ibid. 72.

⁷⁴ Ibid. 66.

⁷⁵ Hart, *Sacramental Commons* xiii.

⁷⁶ Ibid. 11.

⁷³ Ibid. 75.

tiful,” then the esthetic quality of the language we use to describe the sacramental commons becomes crucial.⁷⁷ If Ross is correct, the nature of our descriptive prose is not “merely a question of style” but one of substantive integration. The problem with some of Hart’s language is that in its attempt to be scientifically grounded and spiritually universal it becomes an obstacle to the very sacramentality it attempts to convey. For example:

The Spirit-transcendent envisioned and created the initial form, essential characteristics, and guiding (but not absolutely constraining and limiting) parameters of the energies, elements, entities, and events comprising existence in the dynamic universe and, eventually over time, in the evolutionary commons. Their being and becoming are permeated by Spirit-immanent, who grants their ongoing interactive creativity the freedom to explore and experience varied possibilities with multiple potential outcomes.⁷⁸

In addition to being dense, abstract, and generic, this statement is didactic, thoroughly summing up creation’s meaning in its own complex categories rather than inviting us beyond itself, into greater depth.⁷⁹ The language itself is not sacramental; it seems to be truth without beauty.

The problem here is not Hart’s alone; it is shared by many who employ cosmological language from contemporary philosophy of science, including Berry and Swimme’s universe story.⁸⁰ The immensely difficult project here is to make scientifically informed prose perform poetic and mythological functions normally performed by symbol, metaphor, and nonverbal ritual. It is not impossible; Josef Pieper’s *Leisure, the Basis of Culture* contains examples of analytic prose that successfully point us toward contemplative depth.⁸¹ Ross’s work, therefore, raises concerns for the esthetic quality of the language used at times by Hart and others in this cosmological genre.

The common thread in these last several concerns is the importance of connection to a specific religious community. This is not to eschew the importance of moving beyond them, especially with regard to a global concern like the environment. But it is to emphasize that the development of both virtue and poetic-symbolic power require lived experience within specific traditions. Hart appreciates this point, insisting that the personal, specifically communal, and universal levels of spirituality remain inte-

⁷⁷ Ross, *For the Beauty* 4.

⁷⁸ Hart, *Sacramental Commons* 144.

⁷⁹ For a powerful thematic treatment of religious depth, see John F. Haught, *Deeper than Darwin: The Prospect for Religion in an Age of Evolution* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 2003).

⁸⁰ Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, *The Universe Story: From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era: A Celebration of the Unfolding of the Cosmos* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992).

⁸¹ Josef Pieper, *Leisure, the Basis of Culture*, trans. Gerald Malsbary (South Bend, Ind.: St. Augustine’s, 1998).

grated, even if at times he seems to lose such connection while in his universal mode.⁸² The effectiveness of Ross's lecture derives in part from her movement from the universal back to the particular, as when she weaves general insights about beauty back into a specifically Christian perspective.

THE CHALLENGE OF NORMS

The environmental crisis, as John Paul II and so many others have reiterated, is a *moral* issue. The environmental movement was launched in response to the concrete ecological effects of human actions, and it calls for revised human action in the world. Strong, clear, action-guiding norms would thus be welcome.

For Catholics, it is native to associate an ethical field with a relatively discrete, focused body of principles. The Just War tradition has its *Jus ad bellum* and *Jus in bello* principles; biomedical ethics employs principles such as informed consent, nonmaleficence, and ordinary vs. extraordinary care; Catholic social teaching affirms norms such as respect for all innocent human life, solidarity, subsidiarity, the universal destiny of goods, and the preferential option for the poor. Such norms serve as a locus of organization and mediate between theological vision and concrete application. But certainly when Leopold and, later, White made their complaints, no such body of norms was at hand. The question is whether Christian ecological ethics can generate its own organic set of norms akin to those of other fields.

Jame Schaefer convincingly demonstrates, in her retrieval of patristic and medieval theologies of creation, that the "Christian tradition can be drawn upon to *motivate* believers to join others in addressing the dire [ecological] condition."⁸³ But she goes on to note, in a self-effacing and understated fashion: "Identifying norms to guide human behavior remains a challenge."⁸⁴

At least three types of problems with norms arise in the literature. The first is vagueness. Schaefer's attempts to construct norms illustrate this problem. She is one of the most rigorous Catholic moralists in relation to secular, philosophical environmental literature, and yet even she has difficulty. Her five norms arising from a theological affirmation of natural beauty include: "striving to be open" to natural beauty, "paying close attention" to nature's details, "endeavoring to understand" ecosystems, "acting humbly before God's incomprehensible universe," and "showing

⁸² Hart, *Sacramental Commons* xxii.

⁸³ Schaefer, "Valuing Earth" 808; emphasis added.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.* 809.

reverence to God through preserving species and vistas so they can mediate God's active presence."⁸⁵ These are very general orientations, and they fall short of clear direction. Schaefer's five norms emanating from consideration of intrinsic-instrumental valuing of nature urge us to (1) value the evolutionary process, and (2) to discover and value (a) the innate goodness of the various species and other natural entities, (b) the instrumental relationship of innately good beings to one another, (c) the unique contribution that all the elements of an ecosystem make, and (d) the functioning of ecological systems and the biosphere to achieve their common good.⁸⁶ Again, these are imprecise guides for action.

A second problem occurs with the creation of too many norms. Perhaps in an understandable effort to fill the normative vacuum in a time of urgency, some authors summon principles from many different directions. Toward the end of his book, for example, Hart invokes the Earth Charter, the UN Millennium Development Goals, four biblically rooted Jubilee principles, ten norms for technology assessment, ten principles each from two different bishops' letters, and finally twelve principles of his own. The norms are so wide-ranging and complex as to become unwieldy. Questions arise as to how the various guidelines connect to deeper religious foundations, how they relate one to another, and how individual principles should be critically evaluated and applied.

A third problem arises when, in the absence of effective norms, authors explicitly or implicitly ask sacramentality itself to do the moral work. This request too is understandable and, to an extent, appropriate. A sense of sacramentality in nature does dispose us toward concern for nature. But sacramentality by itself is too diffuse a concept to do the more precise moral work that is often needed. Sacramentality can fill a wide spectrum between bare facticity and fully divine status. It can have varying shades of intensity with differing behavioral correlates. It can inspire gratitude amidst use—including lethal destruction—of nature, as well as a stronger form of reverence prohibiting nature's use. By itself it does not determine what level of spiritual intensity should apply, or what specific actions should be taken. Care must be exercised, then, when we move directly from sacramentality to ecoethical prescriptions; in the absence of effective norms, we risk moral equivocation, as well as a kind of religious moralism that cloaks questionable prescriptions in a gauzy spiritual legitimation.

The basic problem, then, with an absence of workable norms is the lack of coherent mediation between deeper religious foundations and concrete situations. Catholic environmental ethics at present lacks the kind of ac-

⁸⁵ Schaefer, "Appreciating Beauty" 52.

⁸⁶ Schaefer, "Valuing Earth" 809-13.

tion-guiding moral traction that is typical of other areas in the Catholic moral tradition.

Yet other counterbalancing factors should be noted. First, the problem is partially remedied by the application of preexisting norms from Catholic social teaching to environmental issues. The universal destiny of goods, with its communitarian perspective on property ownership and the preferential option for the poor as it connects to ecojustice are two principles effectively applied by Catholic environmentalism, both in its scholarly and institutional forms. So the normative gap is not total. Second, an emphasis on principles is by no means the only moral approach possible, and of course it can bring problems of its own, such as an overemphasis on rationality potentially leading to a deadening rigidity. The weakness of current norms in Catholic environmental ethics can thus be seen as an opportunity for creativity (that other areas of Catholic ethics might envy). Third, it may be that the field of environmental ethics as a whole is so broad and complex that it resists the kind of normative focus achievable in areas such as war and medicine. If so, the appropriate moral tools will vary, and practical wisdom will necessarily play a much stronger role.

In the near future, given the normative weakness of Catholic environmental ethics, its moral effectiveness will be proportional to the quality of its engagement with theological foundations on the one side and specific, lived contexts on the other. Like muscles surrounding a weak joint, religious vision and attention to concrete detail will have to continue carrying most of the normative weight. Several examples from recent work in the field help illustrate this.

In *The Works of Mercy*, Keenan effectively links ecological concern to theological foundations and interprets the corporal and spiritual works from both historical and contemporary perspectives. He defines mercy as entering into the chaos of others in order to help them through it, theologically rooting his interpretation in the order/chaos imagery of the Genesis creation stories. Within this overall framework, he reflects on what “giving drink to the thirsty” should mean for a Christian in today’s world. His own experiences in the Dominican Republic and the Philippines, where access to clean water is difficult, revealed to him how complicated such a “simple” work of mercy can be. The problem of thirst immediately opens out into questions of both political and environmental justice, and beyond that to the developing global water crisis. With the National Catholic Rural Life Conference, he sees that “the call to give drink to the thirsty is itself the call to develop an attitude that respects the needs of those who are poor and that appreciates the gifts of the earth.”⁸⁷ What gives this

⁸⁷ Keenan, *Works of Mercy* 35.

moral exhortation power is that the ecological dimension is not merely an add-on or derivative application, but connected in a natural and primary way to the theological theme: Lack of access to clean water is rooted in ecological chaos rather than in God's loving order.

Another good example of the normative power of theological vision comes from Vigen Guroian, an accomplished gardener, who gives us an ecologically oriented spiritual memoir rooted deeply in Eastern Christian themes.⁸⁸ Recalling his decades of working with the earth, he concludes that gardening "has entirely transfigured my vision of life."⁸⁹ He reflects on his relationship to plants, pets, and family with the help of sources such as St. Ephrem the Syrian, Pseudo-Dionysius, and Armenian hymns. He finds that "the gardens are no less our home than the house,"⁹⁰ an insight that resonates well with Ross's account of beauty. Ultimately, for Guroian, "no earthly garden ever is just an *earthly* garden, for God is in the Garden. Every garden is an image and a sacrament of the One Garden, our lost home of innocence, henceforth our inheritance."⁹¹

Normative power can also be generated from the "ground up," through close attention to particular locations, situations, and stories. Anglican Bishop John Inge develops a Christian theology of place,⁹² while Christine Gudorf and James Huchingson offer case studies focusing on environmental ethics.⁹³ Rosemary Radford Ruether stresses concrete practice in her recent ecofeminist contribution, devoting her entire fourth chapter to grassroots movements, protest actions, and alternative socioeconomic lifestyles from all over the world.⁹⁴ Three more extended examples follow.

We can return again to Hart to help illustrate the importance of attending to particularity as a way of strengthening normative recommendations. As noted earlier, he seems weakest when operating at a widely sweeping normative level. He is at his strongest, when he delves into specific issues and attends to detail; his chapter "Species Survival" is an effective example. He focuses on the issue of salmon depletion on the Columbia-Snake Rivers system, exploring its history, economics, law, wildlife management, and spiritual dimensions. The chapter climaxes in a very specific recom-

⁸⁸ Vigen Guroian, *The Fragrance of God* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2006).

⁸⁹ Ibid. 82.

⁹⁰ Ibid. 59.

⁹¹ Ibid. 49.

⁹² John Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2003).

⁹³ Christine Gudorf and James Huchingson, ed., *Boundaries: A Casebook in Environmental Ethics* (Washington: Georgetown University, 2003).

⁹⁴ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Integrating Ecofeminism, Globalization, and World Religions* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005).

mentation, which he sees as both practically merited and symbolically powerful, to breach four dams in order to help the salmon.⁹⁵ His analysis is wide and deep, attending to many stakeholders and examining many alternatives. This integrated, holistic approach enables him to cut through false dichotomies (such as fish vs. people) and get to the “real issue,” which is “how people see themselves in relation to each other, to other species . . . and to their commons home, and what sort of responsibility they choose to take for these relationships.”⁹⁶ His intimate attention to the many facets of this narrative makes his specific recommendation both credible and meaningful.

An inspiring example of detailed narrative can also be found in Sylvia Hood Washington’s work on the environmental disenfranchisement of black Catholic communities in the United States.⁹⁷ She explores black Catholic responses, “using their own environmental memories and faith as a means to achieve environmental justice for their communities.”⁹⁸ Particularly compelling is the story of a large grant given in 2002 by the Environmental Justice Program of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops to the Knights of Peter Claver, a black Catholic lay organization. The grant eventually generated a rich oral history, as well as booklets, videos, and tours, voicing perceptions of and responses to drastic environmental inequities suffered by black neighborhoods in Chicago. The project became a source of multigenerational collaboration as younger Claver members recorded the oral histories of elders. Renewed with more grant money, the ongoing project is a source of environmental literacy, solidarity, and healing.

A final and most moving example is the life of Sister Dorothy Stang. Roseanne Murphy’s biography of her fellow Sister of Notre Dame lovingly recounts her years of activism in the Amazon, ending with her brutal murder at the hands of ranchers in 2005.⁹⁹ A Christian environmental hero and martyr, Sister Dorothy worked for decades in Brazil on behalf of poor and displaced farmers, helping to establish a farmers’ union, create 23

⁹⁵ Hart, *Sacramental Commons* 113.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.* 111.

⁹⁷ Sylvia Hood Washington, Paul C. Rosier, and Heather Goodall, ed., *Echoes from the Poisoned Well: Global Memories of Environmental Injustice* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington, 2006). See specifically Washington’s contributions: “‘My Soul Looked Back’: Environmental Memories of the African in America, 1600–2000” 55–71; “Wadin’ in the Water: African American Migrant Struggles for Environmental Equality in Cleveland, Ohio, 1928–1970” 127–42; “‘We Come This Far by Faith’: Memories of Race, Religion, and Environmental Disparity” 195–206.

⁹⁸ “‘We Come This Far’” 197.

⁹⁹ Roseanne Murphy, S.N.D. de N., *Martyr of the Amazon: The Life of Sister Dorothy Stang* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2007).

schools, and teach sustainable farming techniques to replace slash and burn methods. Before a Brazilian state senate, she once searingly asked, "Have you ever heard a monkey sobbing in pain as his trees are being burned?"¹⁰⁰ A friend recalled, "Dot knew all about the crucifixion of the earth via the rain forest and how she was trying to resurrect it and the poor people."¹⁰¹ In the face of death threats from rapacious logging and ranching businesses whose illegal activity she exposed, she prayed, "All I ask of God is his Grace to help me keep on this journey, fighting for the people to have a more egalitarian life at all times and that we learn to respect God's creation."¹⁰²

CONCLUSION

We are well into the process of establishing a Christian ecological conscience. This is a complex task, as Gottlieb accurately describes, involving institutional commitments as well as new ideas, spiritual contemplation as well as political activism. As Leopold understood, it is not simply about conduct but about the foundations of conduct. Although we will still await, and may never achieve, the sort of in-principled body of action-guiding norms typical of other areas of Catholic morality, the more important point is that Catholic environmental ethics continues its development toward being, as John Paul II affirmed, an essential part of the faith.

With regard to religious environmentalism more widely considered, other traditions share many of the same challenges posed to Christianity. Stephanie Kaza reports from Buddhism: "No clearly defined environmental agenda or set of principles has been agreed upon by any group of self-identified green Buddhists."¹⁰³ Ruether looks out across the world religions and worries that there is, on the whole, "a failure to make real connections between theory and practice. It is one thing to have a beautiful theory about the sacrality of mountains, rivers, the earth, and the energy that sustains the cosmos. But have these theories actually been translated into an ethical practice?"¹⁰⁴ Her overall judgment is that "world religions have yet to become effective major players in the struggle for an ecologically just and sustainable world. But the potential is there, and there has been extraordinary movement in this direction in the last decade."¹⁰⁵ Thus Ruether strikes an appropriate note of sober hope.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. 116.

¹⁰¹ Ibid. 97.

¹⁰² Ibid. 131.

¹⁰³ Stephanie Kaza, "The Greening of Buddhism: Promise and Perils," in *Handbook of Religion and Ecology* 203.

¹⁰⁴ *Integrating Ecofeminsim* xi.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. 80–81.