

COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY—TOPIC SESSION

- Topic: A Comparative Theological Discussion of Daniel Scheid's *The Cosmic Common Good* (Oxford University Press, 2016).
- Convener: Christian Krokus, University of Scranton
- Moderator: Christian Krokus, University of Scranton
- Presenters: P.J. Johnston, University of Wisconsin Eau-Claire
Michael VanZandt Collins, Boston College
- Respondent: Daniel Scheid, Duquesne University

At the opening of the session Christian Krokus offered a brief summary of Scheid's *The Cosmic Common Good: Religious Grounds for Ecological Ethics*, which includes an argument for comparative theology as one of the means for grounding an inter-religious ecological ethics.

In "Fleeing the Eschatological City: A Comparative Eco-Soteriology," P.J. Johnston opened with an exploration of Scheid's concept of the "commons," wondering whether societies are so far removed from the traditional sense of "commons" as *shared and public space* that the cosmic common good is impossible to achieve without a revolution in our relationships with each other and toward technological progress. Johnston then recovered two ancient religious sources, namely Vedic pastoralist texts and pre-monarchical Jewish-Biblical texts, as resources for imagining different modes of civilization, relationships to the land, and understandings of eschatological fulfillment. Early Vedic literature offers itself, in Johnston's words, as the "perfect religion for nomads" and portrays the enemies of its adherents as those who construct cities, standing armies, fortresses, and so on, in part because the latter begin the process of privatizing the commons. The antimonarchical literature of the Hebrew Bible (e.g., 1 Samuel 8) grudgingly accepts the Davidic system, remaining skeptical and critical of the court's efforts to manage people, land, and resources, the strength of its resistance deriving from early Jewish pastoralist imagery and codes. At the end of the presentation, Johnston asked whether the ancient Vedic and biblical texts might offer a nuanced recovery of the term "commons" and a corrective to overly urbanized Christian notions of the eschaton.

In his presentation, "Dialogue, *Hikmah*, and the Ecological Thought," Michael VanZandt Collins began by highlighting, as a way into a body-centered approach to ecological ethics, Pope Francis' gratitude for the body and its ability to experience the suffering of the cosmos. He drew attention to Timothy Morton's notion of interconnectedness, what Morton calls the "ecological thought," and suggested that it could be enriched and expanded by reading it in light of the work of William Chittick, prominent scholar of Islamic spirituality, on the fundamental Islamic doctrine of *tawhid*, or the oneness of God and the unity of existence. Chittick is in turn dependent upon the insights of the twelfth-century Sufi thinker, Ibn 'Arabi, who distinguished one aspect of the *hikmah* (wisdom) tradition from other forms of scientific investigation, insisting that in the former knowledge is sought as an act of self-fulfillment. Investigating the oneness of God and universe is at the same time to witness to one's participation in that oneness, and all of this confirms the Islamic Qur'an-cosmos-self equivalency. All are signs (*ayat*) of God. Chittick therefore presents a healthy Islamic corrective to Christian understandings that insufficiently grasp the giftedness and interconnectedness of the universe. At the end of his presentation VanZandt Collins

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raised important questions for Scheid about the sources, method, and scope of his theology as well as about the place of Christology in Scheid's work.

Daniel Scheid responded to the suggestions and questions of Johnston and VanZandt Collins, arguing that his focus on creation (rather than Christology) provides a better nexus with other religious traditions, and he simultaneously reaffirmed his Catholic roots and audience while hoping to provoke global ecological conversion. He then raised a few questions that were taken up in conversation with the session attendees. They focused on the ability of Scheid's work to affect other areas of Catholic discourse, on the possible need to reorient the aims of comparative theology in light of the anthropocene, and on the possible recovery of ancient taboos as means for protecting the cosmos.

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