**Is a 'common good' possible?**

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Jun. 3, 2014 in *Global Sisters Report*

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The new Pentecost of Pope Francis is being talked about in many different circles, both Catholic and non-Catholic, and the talk centers around the big issues of the day, including the poor, the economy and the environment, to name a few. Georgetown University has sponsored several events this past year, examining the impact of Pope Francis on the life of the church and the life of the world, capping the year with a three-day discussion on faith, culture and the common good. This most recent event entitled, “[Courtyard of the Gentiles](http://www.georgetown.edu/news/faith-culture-common-good-event-announcement.html),” held April 9 to 11, was a collaborative effort between Georgetown University, the Vatican’s Pontifical Council of Culture and the Archdiocese of Washington, D.C.

The renowned Harvard scholar, Robert Putnam, kicked off the event with an illuminating talk on the growing divide between the “haves” and the “have-nots.” Putnam, author of [*Bowling Alone*](http://bowlingalone.com/)(about the thinning of American social life), focused on the growing segregation in the United States which, he indicated, is at risk of becoming a caste society where the most important factor for young people is the social standing of their parents. Putnam’s remarks set the stage for the rest of the conference, which engaged people of various religious traditions and the challenges of seeking a common good.

While I found the talks informative, intelligent and glibly articulated in the best sense of the academic milieu, I felt there was something missing, in fact, deeply missing, in the overall discussion, as if the search for the common good was taking place down a dark manhole. Perhaps the shorthand version of my “manhole” experience is best summed up in the term “anthropocentric.” The three days of discussion focused on human culture, religious pluralism and the search for the common good; the central subject of every talk was the human person. For all practical purposes, the physical world was simply a backdrop for this concerted effort to gather the human community into a greater whole. At the end of this well-organized event, it was really all about us.

The idea of the common good is not new. In the *Letter to Barnabas*(ca. 80-120 AD) the anonymous author wrote: “Do not live entirely isolated, having retreated into yourselves, as if you were already [fully] justified, but gather instead to seek together the common good.” The concept was a central feature in Saint Augustine’s magnum opus, *The City of God*where the main locus of Augustine’s thought focused on the question, “Is the good life social?” The common good became a central concept in the modern tradition of [Catholic social teaching](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catholic_social_teaching), beginning with the foundational document, [*Rerum Novarum*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rerum_Novarum), a [papal encyclical](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Papal_encyclical) by [Pope Leo XIII](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pope_Leo_XIII) issued in 1891. The [Second Vatican Council](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_Vatican_Council) document [*Gaudium et Spes*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gaudium_et_Spes) (1965) defined the common good as “the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfilment more fully and more easily." Graduate students have written dissertations on the common good while notable scholars have written books and debated its contours.

The overall consensus is that religion plays a significant role in the common good, since religion binds us to the ultimate goodness of life itself, namely, God. The question that pervaded the Georgetown conference was, how can religion (in this case, the monotheistic religions) play a more fruitful role in gathering the human community into a common good?

I sat in the mix of discussions and thought to myself: Religion(s) cannot aid the common good because, for one, the common good does not exist as a unifying social-political principle; and religion is part of the problem, not the solution to the common good. By this I mean that the three monotheistic faiths (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) emerged in the first axial period marked by the religious individual. The three religions have competing metanarratives on at least three major questions: What is the true religion? Who will be saved? And what is the best way to heaven? These three questions basically address the human matrix of social interaction, cultural values and political decisions. The term “postmodernity” is an ambivalent term that best describes the pluralistic nature of modern human community where goods are not in hierarchical value but dialectical tension, not only religiously but also economically, culturally and socially.

A common good implies a cosmic good; the good of any one part is the good of the whole. The problem of religion today as the glue of the common good is the radical disconnect of religion from the whole. All three monotheistic religions developed in an ancient cosmology; all of them fail to take modern cosmology seriously, not simply as intellectual fodder but as the best knowledge on what it means to exist. The monotheistic religions are constructed on the Ptolemaic cosmos, a static, fixed view of the cosmos where being is understood as substance and substantial being is distinguished by greater being and lesser being, where women, earth and pet rocks are considered lesser being than men and angels.

If indeed religion is the core dimension of human life, and life is fragmented politically, socially, religiously and economically, it is no wonder that the fastest growing spirituality today is that of the "NONES" or those of no institutional affiliation? Helping to make the world a better place is not the problem; a large percentage of the NONES are oriented toward social justice. However, *why*we should make the world a better place is a problem. Why should we work together for a common good if we do not hold together a common future, that is, a common religious future? In short, we have no overarching metanarrative; that is, we have no story that binds us together regardless of religion, race, creed or continent.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin recognized the problem of religion over a hundred years ago. The breakdown of a fixed cosmology by the shift from a geocentric model to a heliocentric model has led to the isolation of religion from the development of modern science. In his classic work, *The Human Phenomenon*, he wrote on religion in the context of evolution saying, “evolution is a general condition, which all theories, all hypotheses, all systems must submit to and satisfy from now on in order to be conceivable and true.” Teilhard broadly conceived of all life, including human life, as a movement toward greater convergence, complexity and consciousness.

Evolution means that life is in process; it is incomplete and open to completion in the future; that consciousness plays a significant role in the development of life, along with creativity and inventiveness. We are not *in*evolution; we *are* evolution become conscious of itself. God has been thought of too much in the past, Teilhard said, now we must conceive of God in the future.

While the conference at Georgetown was very informative and enlightening, reflecting the new spirit of Pope Francis, I came away with the conviction that there is still much work to be done. The first work, from my perspective, is to return to nature. Our search for the common good is one indicator of just how unnatural we have become as a species. Religion must be connected to cosmology; and human life to the living flow of biological life. Physical nature can teach us how to live as an integrated whole. We are not at home in nature and thus we are not at home with ourselves. We need a new type of religious orientation which must emerge from our new story of the universe; a new revelatory experience within the evolutionary process which is from the beginning a spiritual as well as a physical process, what Thomas Berry called a “primal sacred community.” To return to nature is to return to God, the living God who is still creating this universe. This path, I anticipate, can lead us to a more fruitful understanding of the common good, not as an ideal to be achieved but as the evolving goodness of interrelated life.