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## Book Review

***Natural Law. In Search of a Common Denominator*, ed. Paul**

**Chummar C.**, Nairobi: CUEA International Symposiums – The Catholic University of Eastern Africa, 2010. Pages: 213+x.

This book is a collection of papers presented at the 1<sup>st</sup> CUEA International Symposium on Natural Law, held at The Catholic University of Eastern Africa, Nairobi, Kenya from 6<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> February 2007. Paul Chummar C., the editor of this present volume, was the chief organizer of the conference.

The concept of Natural Law was the major influence in Christian moral tradition. Christian Fathers and theologians made use of the Natural Law concept to decide upon the goodness or evilness of an action. The use of Natural Law in the Christian tradition was helpful to a great extent in giving Christian moral thinking more clarity and precision, on the other hand, the Natural Law tradition has been criticized for its rigidity in moral reasoning, that it had a fixed concept of the nature of the human person and that the approach was rather ‘physicalist’. Moreover, many have pointed out that the Natural Law tradition made use of the scriptural passages merely as ‘proof text’ as evidence for conclusions already reached, instead of beginning the moral reflection from the vision of the scriptures. In the Catholic tradition, by the second half of the twentieth century the influence of the Natural Law tradition diminished. However, Natural Law continues to be a major source of Catholic moral reflection. In the recent years, there is a renewed interest in the Natural Law thinking, especially because of its advantage as a ‘common denominator’ in the pluralistic context of today. A few years back, the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith gave directives to different philosophical and theological institutes to engage in studies on Natural Law. The CUEA Symposium on Natural Law was organized following a letter on 5<sup>th</sup> November 2004 from Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (the present Pope) who was the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, pointing out the need of exploring the possibilities of the Natural Law. This explains the background of the symposium and the subsequent publication of the papers presented in this collection, *Natural Law. In Search of a Common Denominator*.

The book is divided into five parts: (1) African and Politico-ethical Perspectives, (2) Philosophical, Pedagogical and Legal Perspectives, (3) Biblical Perspectives, (4) Theological Perspectives, and (5) Christian, Hindu and Islamic Perspectives. Besides, the Letter from Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the Message of Cardinal Lavada (the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith), Introduction by Paul

Chummar C., the Opening Address by Archbishop Alain Paul Lebeaupin and the Keynote Address by Gerd Dieter Bossen are given in the beginning. At the end, the closing address by Archbishop Raphael S. Ndingi Mwana a Nzeki and reflections on the seminar by Piotr T. Nowakowski and Jeffrey R. Adams are included. As Paul Chummar C. says in the introduction, the essays included in this book reflect “the uniqueness of the African continent itself in the search for a unique understanding within diversity” and an overview of the “different visions of the one concept of natural law in its universality and particularity, in its complexity and in its simplicity, in its strength and in its weakness, in its challenges and in the solutions it provides.” Archbishop Alain Paul Lebeaupin speaks about the concern of the Church to search for valid norms based on natural law to give moral guidance to the world. Gerd Dieter Bossen (Germany) refers to the present realities of Africa and shows the discrepancies between theories preached and realities practised in the name of the law.

There are three essays in Part One. In his essay “The Political Thought of Thomas Aquinas,” Jeffrey R. Adams tries to expound that Natural Law is not foreign to African ethics and suggests that St Thomas’ political thought founded on Natural Law could give the basis for a morally good politics. Joseph M. Nyasani’s essay, “The Value of Life in African Culture,” examines the notion of the person. In “Natural Law Ethics in Africa: Has it a Future?” Patrick Ryan analyses the future directions of Natural Law in Africa, setting it in two contexts – law in general and in particular in Christian life.

The Second Part consists of four essays. Piotr T. Nowakowski, in “Natural Law in Jean-jacques Rousseau’s Philosophy and its Social and Pedagogical Consequences,” presents the Natural Law concept in Jean-jacques Rousseau and suggests how it can offer a pedagogical paradigm for the life of a university. “Multiculturalism, Ethnicity and Natural Law” by Alexander Lucie-Smith is an attempt to show that there is a universal reasoning providing the basis for unity in diversity. Denis Mason, in “Eros and the Natural Law,” explains how Natural Law can help us to have a deeper understanding of sexuality and to have more stable relationships. Thus Natural Law can become an antidote to the increasing instability in human relationships, he argues. Based on the theories of Herbert Lionel Adolphus Hart and John Finis, Josphat M. Ayamunda, in his essay “Natural Law in Civil Law,” shows the relationship between the law and morality.

In part three, there are two articles on the biblical perspectives: “What can the Creation Narratives Contribute to Reflectin on the Natural Law in Contemporary Africa?” by Lance P. Nadeau, and “The ‘World in Front of the Text’ and the Use of the Bible as Norma Normans in Ethics,” by Jean-bosco Matand Bulembat. Part Four, Theological Perspectives, consists of four articles. Paul Chummar, in “Natural Law: The Foundation for Morally Good Actions and Fullness of Life,” explores for a common denominator for morally good actions, on the premise that in the inmost

heart of every person there is an unquenchable search for morally good actions. “The Trinity as Basis for Marital Behaviour and Sexual Ethics,” by Charles Nyamiti shows the Trinity as the basis for sexual and marital ethics. Peter Hünemann gives an overview of the development of the Natural Law concept and its applications, in his “Some Brief Remarks Concerning Ethical Problems in Africa Today...” Catherine Dean’s “Natural Law and the Meaning of Personal Existence in *Fides et Ratio*” presents a rational level understanding of the Natural Law concept on the basis of the encyclical *Fides et Ratio*.

Whereas the Fourth Part tried to present the Christian understanding of the Natural Law, the Fifth Part deals with the interreligious perspectives on the Natural Law. “Openness to Transcendence,” by George Ndemo Osengo, argues from the Christian perspective that the roots of the evils of the modern world lie in the denial of the universal norm of Natural Law. Augustine Thottakara, in his “Meaning and Mystery of Human Life: A Hindu Interpretation,” presents the concepts of *Rta*, Dharma and Ahimsa in the Hindu religious-philosophical tradition and underscores the necessity of actualizing these principles. Islamic perspectives on the Natural Law are explored by Frederic Ntedika Mvumbi.

Paul Chummar C. has done a commendable work in organizing the conference on the Natural Law and bringing about this scholarly book. These essays surely enlighten us in our search of “a common denominator.”

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