

Intercultural Theological Ethics: Fundamentals, Frameworks, Processes

Edited by

Sigrid Müller,
Mirijam Salfinger,
and
Andrea Vicini, SJ

INTERCULTURAL THEOLOGICAL ETHICS:

Fundamentals, Frameworks, Processes

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DEDICATION

For all those who foster intercultural interactions in respectful and inclusive ways, contributing to a culturally richer and more just world.

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Sigrid Müller, Mirijam Salfinger, and Andrea Vicini, SJ

1. Introduction

Mirijam Salfinger, Sigrid Müller, and Andrea Vicini, SJ

Intercultural ethics examines the question of how universal ethical principles can be realized in a pluralistic and culturally diverse world. Intercultural theological ethics explores how the different manifestations and traditions of the Christian faith can ethically dialogue with one another in order to develop common ethical perspectives within the horizon of Christian faith. Intercultural theological ethics is becoming increasingly urgent but is still in its beginning, even though both intercultural philosophy¹ and theology² have been established since the 1980s. Against the backdrop of cultural diversity, intercultural theological ethics deals with moral issues, norms, and values.

The central question here is how different cultural (and thus also ethical) traditions can dialogue and join in respectful exchange with each other in order to agree on values and norms that enable respectful and peaceful coexistence between individual actors and groups. But there is a tension between universal values and cultural relativity, and the extent to which different value systems are compatible with each other is an open question. As Richard Evanoff, a professor of intercultural communication, states, “The key problem investigated by intercultural ethics is how these norms might be arrived at, given the fact that different cultures have different systems of ethics, which may be incompatible with each other.”³ It is not only the differences in values and traditions that pose a challenge, but also the fact that values and norms are not necessarily homogeneous

¹ Hans Schelkshorn, “Interkulturelle Philosophie und der Diskurs der Moderne: Eine Programmatische Skizze,” *Polylog: Zeitschrift für interkulturelles Philosophieren* 25 (2011): 75.

² Judith Gruber, *Intercultural Theology: Exploring World Christianity after the Cultural Turn*, Research in Contemporary Religion 25 (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2018), 36–39.

³ Richard Evanoff, “Introducing Intercultural Ethics,” in *The Cambridge Handbook of Intercultural Communication*, ed. G. Rings and S. Rasinger (Cambridge University Press, 2020), 187.

even within cultures. Therefore, values are not unchanging entities but should instead be understood as “dynamic realities.”⁴

Because of these dynamics, the ethicist Michelle Becka emphasizes the need for mutual respect and a willingness to accept plurality. The absolutization of one way of thinking would prevent an appropriate and fair exchange. Interculturality, therefore, presupposes openness towards otherness and an honest interest in and recognition of the other.⁵ She refers to *inter* in “interculturality” as an open space that must necessarily be cultivated. Hence, *inter* refers both to the gaps and ruptures between the different contexts but also guards against a “rhetoric of harmony,” which may silence diversity.⁶ It is precisely this gap that creates the space for something new and the opportunity for genuine dialogue.⁷

The exchange of opinions within an intercultural dialogue holds “the possibility that we may change our own opinions in light of persuasive arguments presented by others.” Such dialogue “may involve not only mutual understanding but also mutual transformation.”⁸ As Richard Evanoff states:

Whenever cooperation between people from cultures with conflicting norms is necessary, however, perhaps the best way to peacefully resolve such conflicts is through dialogue which aims to build (construct) not walls but bridges between those cultures. Dialogue is undoubtedly one of the most important forms of intercultural communication that can be engaged in by people from different cultures, particularly in a

⁴ Schellshorn, “Interkulturelle Philosophie und der Diskurs der Moderne,” 75. Our translation.

⁵ Michelle Becka, “Reconocimiento como base de la interculturalidad: Hacia una práctica transformadora,” in *La cuestión del reconocimiento en América Latina: Perspectivas y problemas de teoría político-social de Axel Honneth*, ed. G. Sauerwald and R. Salas Astrain (LIT, 2017), 63–66. See also James F. Keenan, “The Color Line, Race, and Caste: Structures of Domination and the Ethics of Recognition,” *Theological Studies* 82, no. 1 (2021): 69–94; James F. Keenan, “Social Trust and the Ethics of Our Institutions,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 42, no. 2 (2022): 245–263.

⁶ Becka, “Reconocimiento como base de la interculturalidad,” 66. Our translation.

⁷ Becka, “Reconocimiento como base de la interculturalidad,” 66.

⁸ Evanoff, “Introducing Intercultural Ethics,” 199.

globalized world in which people with different ethical norms increasingly interact with each other.⁹

The Workshop on Intercultural Theological Ethics held in Vienna in September 2023, which led to this book, aimed to enter into such a dialogue in order to build a foundation for intercultural ethics within the framework of theology. Introducing this intercultural perspective into theological ethics is important because it helps foster decolonialization processes and postcolonial approaches, and it is also a necessary consequence of a synodal understanding of the Catholic Church. Synodality is concerned with the *sensus fidelium*. It is a process that encourages Christians from all over the world to promote a shared understanding of the relevance of faith in their lives and interpret personal moral insights in the light of faith.¹⁰ If decisions in the Church are to be made bottom-up, then intercultural theology and theological ethics are unavoidable.

Since intercultural theological ethics is still in its infancy, the workshop aimed to open a space for discussion and address methodological and systematic questions. First during the workshop and then in this volume, a diverse group of international and emerging scholars contributed to what we could call a first sketch of how intercultural theological ethics could develop more deeply. The workshop focused on the relationship between cultural manifestations of ethics and universalistic claims in the Church's moral teaching and ethical theory; the limits of appeals to cultural diversity; tensions between local and global forms of ethical and ecclesial reasoning and decision-making; the scope of shared anthropological and ethical assumptions; the relationship between theological and philosophical approaches to intercultural ethics; and various forms of consensus-building.

⁹ Evanoff, "Introducing Intercultural Ethics," 199.

¹⁰ Sigrid Müller, "Synodalität: Ein Prinzip kirchlicher Meinungsbildung in Sachen der Moral?," in *Ewig wahr? Zur Genese und zum Anspruch von Glaubensüberzeugungen*, ed. G. Werner, S. Wendel and J. Scheiper, Quaestiones disputatae 332 (Herder, 2023), 232–245.

In order to address interculturality from a broad perspective, the contributions of young scholars from different continents enriched both the presentations and the discussions that followed. This global approach offered a unique opportunity to young academics to engage colleagues in theological ethics working in diverse cultural contexts, fostering an enriching exchange of ideas.

During the workshop, it became visible that, in comparison to other approaches to intercultural theological ethics, the main focus was not on the question of how universal principles could be translated into different cultures, which presupposes a more static understanding of culture and a more hierarchical understanding of theological ethics. Rather, many contributions showed that rule-based processes and being attentive to challenges, which depend on encountering others in their diversity, enrich one's approach. Moreover, some of the papers showed that, in cases of conflict, discussions about how to interpret fundamental ethical principles—while upholding the dignity of the human person—need to be part of the process of engaging one another across differences and seeking the good of both the community and the individual, within and beyond the realm of Christianity.

Since numerous authors point out that equality in dialogue is not always a given due to different preconditions, a focus on alterity, otherness, and intersectionality should become integral to the methodological spectrum of intercultural theological ethics. Furthermore, attending to alterity, otherness, and intersectionality is not merely methodological in nature and does more than establish a just starting point for equality in ethical dialogue. The different approaches that surface are significant because they reveal the diversity within which commonalities and differences are experienced.

Overview

In the first part of this volume, three contributions discuss the foundations of intercultural theological ethics from different perspectives. María Gil

Espinosa argues that the project of intercultural theological ethics is necessarily based on communion with God and an awareness of the interconnectedness of the world. This foundation leads to a common project of intercultural morality in which diversity is seen as an asset and a source of enrichment.

In her contribution, Sigrid Müller argues that intercultural theological ethics should be based on human dignity and aim at the universal good while being aware of diverse cultural interpretations. She argues that the task of intercultural theological ethics is to negotiate diversity in dialogue, striving to solve ethical problems within and across cultures, while examining attitudes and perspectives that should characterize such processes.

Peter Sedgwick explores contemplative pragmatics as the spiritual foundation of intercultural theological ethics and stresses the importance of spirituality. He argues that, as the example of sacramental ethics shows, worship can be regarded as a transformation of the self that leads to further action.

In the second part of the book, the authors examine a possible framework for intercultural theological ethics. Franz Gmainer Pranzl proposes the concept of “catholicity” as a hermeneutic model that mediates between universality and contextuality. Hence, intercultural theological ethics can contribute to fostering “intellectual synodality.”

Shaji George points to the need for constructing a pluralistic ethics. He emphasizes that plurality is part of the reality of ordinary life, as is made plain by examining the complex Indian context. For him, the goal is to identify a shared and common ethical ground while working with others.

Agnes Brazal argues for a discourse-centered understanding of culture as well as a constructive realist view of intercultural ethics that can serve as a framework for an intercultural conversation. To ensure equality and objectivity, she promotes assigning epistemological privilege to marginalized groups as one of five criteria for intercultural theological ethics that she outlines in her chapter.

The third part of the book is dedicated to the methods and attributes that are required to promote intercultural theological ethics. Sigrid Rettenbacher contends with the issue of silenced voices and excluded knowledge, as well as the question of representation in the world church, pointing to the importance of making the unseen visible. To articulate her constructive proposal, she deploys critical studies of whiteness and postcolonial theories.

Mirijam Salfinger argues that intercultural theological ethics must adopt a gender-sensitive approach. Hence, she advocates for a paradigm shift towards an inclusive, holistic, realistic, and multidimensional anthropology, and contends that intersectionality, decolonialization, and postcolonialism are necessary components of intercultural theological ethics.

In the third chapter of this part, Richard Rwiza argues that small Christian communities integrate faith into daily life, foster cultural-theological dialogue, and drive social transformation, thereby playing a key role in Africa's rapidly growing Christianity and in implementing the Church's synodal vision.

The authors in the fourth part of the book explore different ethical challenges in promoting intercultural theological ethics. Jude Buyondo emphasizes that intercultural theological ethics requires a decolonized pluriversal dialogue between the colonizers and the colonized. The aim is to contribute to the decolonization of past and contemporary neo-colonial mechanisms of oppression.

Based on teaching experiences in Sri Lanka and Italy, Vimal Tirimanna shows that the depth of experience that is possible to express in one language cannot simply be translated into another. For him, understanding and considering the diverse specificities and nuances of particular cultures and languages is constitutive of doing and teaching theological ethics.

Adam Widera examines the problem of dialogue between epistemic cultures like biosciences and theological ethics. He states that this dialogue is itself an intercultural project. Furthermore, he shows that the

biosciences can help discover ways to establish common ground as they offer empirically proven approaches within the framework of the theory of cultural evolution.

The contribution of Maria Haneder-Kulterer focuses on the Kenyan philosopher Henry Odera Orika. She shows how his ethical contributions are rooted in African culture but that he aims at global justice, thereby offering valuable insights for intercultural theological ethics.

In the final chapter Andrea Vicini reflects on the workshop process and anticipates the possible future of intercultural theological ethics. He critically examines the role of moral agents and institutions and reflects on both the challenges and possibilities that arise from these agents and their agency.

2. Relational Theology: Foundation for an Intercultural Morality

María Isabel Gil Espinosa

Introduction

Before beginning the sketch of the foundations of intercultural and relational moral theology, it is necessary to keep in mind that the reflection and debate on the category interculturality is quite recent.¹ It has been only used more widely in specific areas “where it is necessary to account for cultural processes and interactions.”² Reflection and debate on intercultural moral theology is even more incipient: “There is still no sufficiently elaborate theoretical background to serve as a safe north; particularly in the difficult hermeneutical and methodological questions. . . .”³ Therefore, it is a path that is just beginning and where there are more questions than answers. For example, Can interculturality be understood as overcoming the model of inculturation? Can interculturality be understood as a method that helps a process of interaction and communication that favors intercultural dialogue in theology? We must pursue a dialogue that is carried out from a horizon of inclusion and equity, such that no culture is considered superior with respect to others, because “little by little we understand that there is no culture but cultures, that we cannot continue to consider that there are superior and inferior cultures, since this differentiation is the product of logics of conquest and domination that

¹ This contribution is a translated version of the Spanish text, which has been checked and adapted by the editors.

² Ricardo Salas Astrain, *Ética intercultural: Ensayos de una ética discursiva para contextos culturales conflictivos. (Re)lecturas del pensamiento latinoamericano* (Abya-Yala, 2006), 53–54.

³ Raúl Fornet-Betancourt, *Hacia una transformación intercultural de la filosofía: Ejercicios teóricos y prácticos de filosofía intercultural en el contexto de la globalización* (Ediciones digitales, 2020), 19.

must be overcome.”⁴ Taking this context into account is the starting point for our reflection, as it will help us understand more clearly the challenges, possibilities, and limits of the project of elaborating an intercultural moral theology.

With this context in mind, we can then say that “intercultural understanding occurs in the discovery and encounter with the other who is my brother.”⁵ Moreover, adopting a relational theology and the paradigm of communion, we can realize that we are part of an intertwined world. We are united by very deep bonds because “God ... is Trinitarian communion,” and we can recognize that “*each creature bears in itself a specifically Trinitarian structure*”⁶ (*Laudato Si'*, no. 239). “The being of God is a relational being: without the concept of communion it would not be possible to speak of the being of God.”⁷ So, “It challenges us to read reality in a Trinitarian key. ‘The world created according to the divine model is a web of relationships’ hence everything is connected,”⁸ everything is related and communicated with everything. For this reason, and as Pope Francis affirms in the foreword to *Veritatis Gaudium*, “Recognizing this interdependence ‘obliges us to think of *one world with a common plan*.’ . . . Indeed, ‘at this time theology must address conflicts: not only those that we experience within the Church but also those that concern the world as a whole’” (*Veritatis Gaudium*, no. 4).

This scenario and theological framework show us where, and give us the reasons why, we should undertake this challenging task of building an intercultural moral theology. When based on a relational theology, this

⁴ *Reflexiones de Raúl Fornet-Betancourt sobre el concepto de interculturalidad*, ed. Consorcio Intercultural (Coordinación General de Educación Intercultural Bilingüe, 2004), 7.

⁵ Gerardo M. Nieves-Loja, “Algunas reflexiones sobre la interculturalidad: Una aproximación interdisciplinaria,” *Aufklärung: Journal of Philosophy* 5, no. 3 (2018): 167–180, doi.org/10.18012/arf.2016.43720.

⁶ The quotation in italics is from St. Bonaventure.

⁷ John D. Zizioulas. *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church*, ed. P. McPartlan (T&T Clark, 2006), 1.

⁸ Juan Carlos Scannone, “Hacia una iglesia sinodal y una cultura del encuentro,” in *Antropología trinitaria: Hacia una cultura del encuentro. Para una pastoral en clave trinitaria*, ed. A. Bertolini and L. Cerviño (CELAM, 2019), 108–109.

task underlines the importance of becoming aware of our interdependence. It also underlines the obligation we have to think of a single world and to build a common project. We must always bear in mind that this will ultimately be a matter of entering into a relationship of communion, because we are all one. In this sense, Pope Francis stressed that communion can only be built in the difference and richness of diversity.

So, in this approach, I first try to show that, from an authentically Christian perspective, moral theology is a response to a call. Concretely, it is about a morality of following. This is a call found in the concept of revelation contained in *Dei Verbum* (no. 2), wherein revelation is understood as the free and gratuitous self-communication and self-giving of God, who invites us to be God's friends and to live in God's company. Consequently, morality is nothing more than the response to this invitation, a response that implies the conscience and full freedom of the one who responds. For this reason, this chapter contends that morality is not a question of universal norms, doctrines, laws, and principles that are binding on everyone.

With this claim in mind, this chapter also presents relational theology as a condition of possibility for an intercultural moral theology. This reveals the difficulty of developing an intercultural morality rooted in a theology that emphasizes essence and substance rather than one that understands God as fundamentally relational and communal. In the same way, I identify some elements of the paradigm of communion or relational theology that are considered theological foundations for an intercultural morality.

Moral Theology as a Response to a Call

Morality, from an authentically Christian perspective, is a response to a call. This position is situated in the theological horizon proposed by the Second Vatican Council, which corresponds to what I term the call-response scheme, which we could also call a morality of vocation in Christ, a morality of following. On this account, "Man always experiences himself

as being called to this relationship of loving communion with God and to give an answer to such a call. His very nature has been created with a view to that communion by grace.”⁹

The opposite, which is the horizon of much preconciliar moral theology, would be the law-compliance scheme. Underlying it is a concept of revelation that is indisputably different and that will have important effects on the way of understanding, interpreting, and explaining morality. In this horizon of renewed morality, in accordance with the guidelines of the Second Vatican Council, conscience and freedom are of great relevance since we can consider these two aspects as enabling an authentic response to the God who calls and loves unconditionally.

Revelation as God's Free Self-Communication and Self-Giving

If we start from the conviction that the center of all theology is the free and gratuitous self-communication and self-giving of God to the creature then all other affirmations must be considered secondary.¹⁰ If the event of revelation is the foundation and condition of possibility of theology then moral theology, as a true theological discipline, also has its foundation and its condition of possibility in this central event.¹¹ Consequently, the fundamental elements that constitute a specifically Christian morality are grace, salvation, justification, discipleship, faith, hope, and love, which all derive from the central event of theology, which is revelation.

This understanding of theology was anticipated by the constitution of the Second Vatican Council *Dei Verbum*, which explains:

⁹ Gonzaga Zarazaga, *Dios es communion: El nuevo paradigma trinitario* (Secretariado trinitario, 2004), 29.

¹⁰ This is how Rahner expressed it in his last lecture on February 12, 1984 at the closing of a congress at the Catholic academy of the Diocese of Freiburg, which was entitled “The Experiences of a Catholic Theologian.”

¹¹ Karl Rahner, *Hearers of the Word*, trans. Michael Richards, ed. J. B. Metz (Herder, 1969), 167; see also Rino Fisichella, “Theology I. Definition,” in *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, ed. R. Latourelle and R. Fisichella (Crossroad, 1994), 1060; see also Josef Fuchs, *La moral y la teología moral postconciliar* (Herder, 1969), 11.

In His goodness and wisdom God chose to reveal Himself and to make known to us the hidden purpose of His will (see Eph. 1:9) by which through Christ, the Word made flesh, man might in the Holy Spirit have access to the Father and come to share in the divine nature (see Eph. 2:18; 2 Peter 1:4). Through this revelation, therefore, the invisible God (see Col. 1:15, 1 Tim. 1:17) out of the abundance of His love speaks to men as friends (see Ex. 33:11; John 15:14–15) and lives among them (see Bar. 3:38), so that He may invite and take them into fellowship with Himself. This plan of revelation is realized by deeds and words having an inner unity: the deeds wrought by God in the history of salvation manifest and confirm the teaching and realities signified by the words, while the words proclaim the deeds and clarify the mystery contained in them. By this revelation then, the deepest truth about God and the salvation of man shines out for our sake in Christ, who is both the mediator and the fullness of all revelation. (no. 2)

Obviously, God is self-communication. “Theologically, this raises the question of God’s relationship to us,” which is characterized by its nearness and freedom, on the one side, and by the incomprehensible remaining distance between us, on the other.¹² By coming close, God opens the door to mystery,¹³ “the mystery of a God who refuses to be alone; that is why the

¹² “The concept of self-communication means: (a) the absolute nearness of God as the incomprehensible mystery which remains forever such; (b) the absolute freedom, hence the irreducible facticity of this self-communication, which remains a ‘mystery’ for this reason too; (c) that the inner possibility of the self-communication as such (absolute communication of the absolutely incomprehensible) can never be perceived. It is experienced as an event in pure facticity, it cannot be deduced from another point, and as such again it remains a mystery.” Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel (Burns & Oates; Herder, [originally published in German in *Mysterium salutis*], 1970), 88, n. 10.

¹³ Rahner states that “in this very event of God’s absolute self-communication the Godness of God as the holy mystery becomes radical and insuppressible reality for man. The immediacy of God in his self-communication is precisely the revelation of God as the absolute mystery which remains such.” Karl Rahner, *Fundamental Course on Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. William V. Dych (Crossroad, 1978), 120. He also confirms that “Grace is therefore the grace of the *nearness* of the *abiding* mystery: it makes God accessible in the form of the holy mystery and presents him thus as the incomprehensible.” Karl Rahner, “The Concept of Mystery in Catholic

Word comes forth: expression, call, dialogue.”¹⁴ God’s dynamic revelation draws the human being into experiencing the mystery.¹⁵ God, moved by love, gives Godself to the human being as a permanent offer of grace and salvation. Karl Rahner explains the core of this relationship between God’s self-communication and the human being as follows:

When we speak of God’s self-communication we should not understand this term in the sense that God would say something about himself in some revelation or other. The term “self-communication” is really intended to signify that God in his own most proper reality makes himself the innermost constitutive element of man. We are dealing, then, with an *ontological* self-communication of God.¹⁶

From this we can infer several elements which are important for understanding the relationship between God and human beings:

1. That “God’s self-communication means . . . that what is communicated is really God in his own being.”¹⁷ It should be emphasized that when speaking of revelation as self-communication, God cannot be understood as if God manifested a series of truths about God to which the human being must adhere; even less can it be understood as if God

Theology,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 4, *More Recent Writings*, trans. Kevin Smyth (Helicon Press; Darton, Longman & Todd, 1966), 56; see also Rahner, *Fundamental Course on Faith*, 44–89.

¹⁴ Lorenzo Álvarez Verdes, “La *Dei Verbum*, una constitución clave para la comprensión del Concilio Vaticano II,” *Studia Moralia* 41, no. 2 (2003): 237.

¹⁵ “It is an experience of mystery as such, or, rather, a letting oneself be apprehended by a mystery, always present, which at once overwhelms us and escapes us. . . . The Absolute is communicated as it is, as the incomprehensible, as ‘the from where’ constituent and enabling foundation of its own being, and as the ‘to where’ of its own transcendental dynamic. And this constitutive transcendence, as the transcendence of love, interprets in turn that from where and that to where as the sacred mystery that overwhelms the human being and by which he experiences himself as inhabited and sustained ontologically.” Santiago Arzubialde, “The Experience of God’s Transcendental in the Work of K. Rahner,” *Ecclesiastical Studies* 80 (2005): 298–299.

¹⁶ Rahner, *Fundamental Course on Faith*, 116.

¹⁷ Rahner, *Fundamental Course on Faith*, 117.

revealed or communicated a series of commands, precepts, and norms that human beings must obey and fulfill.¹⁸ Consequently, adherence to a list of truths about God, and obedience and compliance with a series of commandments, precepts, norms, and laws, even if they are unintelligible, cannot be the conditions of possibility to be justified and thus be able to access salvation and participate in grace.¹⁹

2. That God's intentionality in self-communicating Godself to humankind goes far beyond offering forgiveness and reconciliation—it is the invitation to “‘share in the divine nature’ (*Dei Verbum*, no. 2).”²⁰ To understand the purpose of revelation only in this sense, even if it is a grandiose fact, would not cease to be a reductionist vision: “God’s loving call is always a call . . . a choice (Rom 8:28–33; 2 Tim 1:9; 2 Pt 1:10).”²¹ As we pointed out before, “‘self-communication’ is really intended to signify that God in his own most proper reality makes himself the innermost constitutive element of man.”²² In this way, the self-communication of God has an ontological and real meaning,²³ that is, the most intimate part of the human is constituted by the very being of God who

¹⁸ Álvarez recalls the two tendencies in the initial drafting of the text of *Dei Verbum*, a static and a dynamic one: “The choice for the second model was clear from the moment the first scheme was withdrawn.” Álvarez Verdes, “La *Dei Verbum*, una constitución clave para la comprensión del Concilio Vaticano II,” 219.

¹⁹ Henri De Lubac and Enrico Cattaneo, “La Constitución *Dei Verbum* 20 años después,” *Selecciones de teología* 104 (1987): 343.

²⁰ Réne Latourelle, “*Dei Verbum* II. Commentary,” in *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, ed. R. Latourelle and R. Fisichella (Crossroad, 1994), 220.

²¹ Karl Rahner, “Theos in the New Testament,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 1, trans. Cornelius Ernst (Helicon, 1961), 115. See also page 117, “Of all that man has learnt by experience about God in saving history, the decisive thing is that out of his grace God the Father has called us in his Son to the most intimate community with him.”

²² Rahner, *Fundamental Course on Faith*, 116.

²³ Karl Rahner, “La comunicación de Dios mismo al hombre,” in *Sacramentum Mundi: Enciclopedia Teológica*, vol. 2 (Herder, 1972), 345.

freely and gratuitously communicates Godself.²⁴ This communication of God's very being to human existence also implies that God, taking place in us, makes us sharers in God's own divine life. Because "man is the being created by a God who desires to communicate himself, to pour out the love that He is."²⁵

3. That "Man is the event of a free, unmerited and forgiving, and absolute self-communication of God."²⁶ This presupposes that the communication between God and the human being does not change their mutual essence: "Divine self-communication means, then, that God can communicate himself in his own reality to what is not divine without ceasing to be infinite reality and absolute mystery, and without man ceasing to be a finite existent different from God."²⁷ According to Rahner, the human being is the proper place of God's self-communication, since "if there occurs a self-communication of God to historical man, who is still becoming, it can occur only in this unifying duality of history and transcendence which man is."²⁸ From this we can conclude that there is a historical dimension to God's self-revelation: it means that God reveals Godself in history because "God's self-giving, with its effects on man and on his insertion in the world, comes to be understood . . . as an event in historically situated man."²⁹
4. That the openness and acceptance of God's offering of Himself to humankind, in communicating Godself in the depths of their existence, necessarily implies a free human response: "The freedom God always guarantees to man is the freedom of accepting

²⁴ Rahner, *Fundamental Course on Faith*, 123–124.

²⁵ Gonzalo Zarazaga, *Dios es comunión: El nuevo paradigma trinitario* (Secretariado trinitario, 2004), 152.

²⁶ Rahner, *Fundamental Course on Faith*, 116.

²⁷ Rahner, *Fundamental Course on Faith*, 119.

²⁸ Rahner, *The Trinity*, 92.

²⁹ Fernando Berrios, "El método antropológico-trascendental de Karl Rahner como hermenéutica teológica del mundo y de la praxis," *Teología y Vida* 45 (2004): 433.

absolutely the absolute mystery which we call God, in the sense that God is not just one among other objects of our neutral freedom of choice, but he who only becomes known to man in this absolute act of freedom and in whom alone the very essence of freedom is fully achieved.”³⁰

Conscience and Freedom as a conditio sine qua non for a Response

Situated, then, in the theological framework that presents revelation to us as God’s free and gratuitous self-communication and self-giving to humanity, let us ask ourselves what the necessary conditions are for responding to this invitation to be God’s friends and live in God’s company (*Dei Verbum*, no. 2). In the response to this call, we find the center and the marrow of an authentic Christian morality:

If truth is the encounter between God and man, if belief does not mean the mere acceptance of some scientifically undemonstrable affirmations but the existential response to a God who gives himself, then divine revelation and human faith are but the two sides of the one process of the relationship between man and God. In a personal relationship there is no subject or object—certainly, we can treat the other as a thing, but this is not properly qualified as an interhuman encounter—there are two people who create among themselves not an undifferentiated unity, but a profound communion. . . . Biblical faith must not deviate into either objectivism or subjectivism, because both are concepts alien to the truth it postulates. Christianity knows that it does not have an object, but is at the disposal of a Person; that the important thing is not that his faith adds new knowledge or criteria, but that it fundamentally transforms him; and who always has at his side the Presence of the One who will never leave him alone.³¹

³⁰ Karl Rahner, *Grace in Freedom* (Herder & Herder, 1969), 205.

³¹ Jorge Zazo Rodríguez, *El encuentro: Propuesta para una teología fundamental* (Secretariado trinitario, 2010), 25–26.

In *Gaudium et Spes*, the Council presents us with two aspects of fundamental importance for our research: the dignity of conscience and the greatness of freedom. These two aspects complement the four criteria listed above.

In the depths of his conscience, man detects a law which he does not impose upon himself, but which holds him to obedience. Always summoning him to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience when necessary speaks to his heart: do this, shun that. . . . Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a man. There he is alone with God, Whose voice echoes in his depths. In a wonderful manner conscience reveals that law which is fulfilled by love of God and neighbor Conscience frequently errs from invincible ignorance without losing its dignity. The same cannot be said for a man who cares but little for truth. In fidelity to conscience, Christians are joined with the rest of men in the search for truth, and for the genuine solution to the numerous problems which arise in the life of individuals from social relationships and goodness, or for a conscience which by degrees grows practically sightless as a result of habitual sin. (no. 16)

Undoubtedly, the reference made by the Council to conscience signifies a change of horizon for moral theology. Traditionally, morality was situated in the fulfilment of laws, norms, and precepts, but now the Council places it in fidelity to one's conscience. Conscience is the tabernacle where the deepest relationship of the human being with God occurs. It is the Love of God poured into the depths of every human being (Rom 5:5), into their conscience, which tells them how to do good and reject evil.

With regard to freedom, the Council points out that "only in freedom can man direct himself toward goodness. ... For its part, authentic freedom is an exceptional sign of the divine image within man. For God has willed that man remain 'under the control of his own decisions,' so that he can seek his Creator spontaneously, and come freely to utter and blissful perfection through loyalty to Him" (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 17). Rahner concludes: "Inasmuch as freedom is always and in all its acts directed to the

mystery of God himself, the act of freedom is essentially always the act of man's surrender to the providence of God and in this sense a trusting risk."³² Bearing in mind that grace liberates freedom and thus constitutes its highest possibility—that is to say, God places in the depths of the human existential structure the very capacity to welcome the divine—the response of human freedom will consist in a definitive stance in the face of this radical challenge of God who freely communicates Godself.³³

The God who reveals Godself is moved by divine will for lordship and communion, and in these terms we must understand the human relationship with God, which is equivalent to saying that this relationship is understood within the framework of freedom. Certainly, as the Creator of all that exists, God is already Lord of the universe. But God does not want to be Lord only 'over' human beings but 'of' humankind. That is why we need the gift of our freedom. For this reason, and because only with freedom can we respond to God's love, to God's desire for communion.³⁴

Authentically Christian morality is therefore a morality centered on the call as a free gift, which emphasizes the personal relationship between God and human beings. Vocation in Christ is, in turn, a gift and a task because it necessarily presupposes our response—a response that implies at the same time the totality of the being who responds.

Relational Theology as a Condition of Possibility for an Intercultural Moral Theology

The previous section showed that revelation is the free and gratuitous self-communication and self-giving of God, who invites us to be friends and to live in God's company. Consequently, and from an authentically Christian perspective, morality is nothing more than a response to a call.

³² Rahner, *Grace in Freedom*, 220.

³³ Berrios, "Teología trascendental y praxis," 481.

³⁴ Zazo Rodríguez, *El encuentro*, 25–26.

This response implies the conscience and full freedom of the respondent. It is a morality of fellowship. Vatican II brought about a change from a theology that is based on essence and substance to an understanding of a God who is essentially relational and communal.³⁵ This section argues that this change is a necessary requirement for an intercultural moral theology.

Relational Theology versus an Essentialist and Substantialist Theology

When we refer to the concept of revelation, this is nothing more than explaining how we understand God's communication with us. Such explanations recall a certain cultural background. For example, one consequence of the cultural changes that occurred in the early centuries of the Church is the hellenization of Christianity. So, in many instances, one would almost wonder if texts of that time are talking about the God of Plato, the God of Aristotle, or the God of the Gospel.³⁶

In view of the dogmatic theological development of the first centuries, one speaks, not without reason, of a hellenization of Christian thought, of an entry of the biblical kerygma under the signs of hellenically preformed metaphysics; the difference between thinking and speaking in the Bible, and thinking and speaking in the theological tradition of late antiquity, must be emphasized.³⁷

This hellenization of Christianity has brought disastrous consequences for the understanding of God, for theological anthropology, and for morality. Despite the Second Vatican Council, this hellenized Christianity continues to have strength in some circles, and theological thought continues to be elaborated from the categories of a non-Christian philosophy.

³⁵ Piero Coda, *Desde la Trinidad: El advenimiento de Dios entre historia y profecía* (Secretariado trinitario, 2014), 99.

³⁶ Klaus Hemerle, *Tras las huellas de Dios: Ontología trinitaria y unidad relacional* (Sígueme, 2005), 25.

³⁷ Hemerle, *Tras las huellas de Dios*, 33–34.

This is not the space to develop the consequences I have mentioned. I will only focus on Hemerle's observation that the hellenistic interpretation of God obscures the event of revelation in historical-salvific, Christocentric, and Trinitarian terms, as it is expressed in *Dei Verbum*, no. 2. The God who reveals Godself is not a deity, nor an immovable mover, nor an essence or substance. And here we have a great problem, a consequence precisely of this hellenization of Christianity, since "despite their orthodox confession of the Trinity, Christians are, in their practical life, almost mere 'monotheists.' We must be willing to admit that, should the doctrine of the Trinity have to be dropped as false, the major part of religious literature could well remain virtually unchanged."³⁸ That is, we are theists, but we are not Christians. Drawing on Rahner, Piero Coda explains this development, writing, "Western theology has ended up imposing the understanding of the relationship between God and salvation history, too often leaving its organic connection in the shadows. Consequently, a theology of the immanent Trinity has been elaborated that dispenses with the dynamics of salvation history, forgetting that only from the economy of revelation can one adequately go back to the being of the Trinity itself."³⁹

Understanding the Trinitarian mystery in ways that rely on Greek concepts of essences and substances fails to resolve the divide between God and the world. Those dichotomies have led us to understand the human being through the dualism of the body and the soul, two antagonistic and irreconcilable categories. It has led us to understand reality as divided into the sacred and profane, as if all creation were not the self-revelation of God. Gonzalo Zarazaga indicates that we should follow Rahner in his critique of this divide:

God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God is in himself the Trinity. Only in this way is it one and not by virtue of a single abstract substance. The treatise on the Trinity must therefore not start from the metaphysical

³⁸ Rahner, *The Trinity*, 10–11.

³⁹ Coda, *Desde la Trinidad*, 104.

consideration of that one substance in order to be able to think of the one God, but must start from the Trinity itself as it has been manifested to us in the salvific economy: as the Father who sends the Son and the Holy Spirit to bring about redemption and to offer salvation. The immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity are always the same and only God who gives himself totally to the world and to men as he is.⁴⁰

The Paradigm of Communion

What we have said so far has many consequences for our theology in general and for the elaboration of an intercultural moral theology in particular. “But,” as Zarazaga observes, “this service can only be rendered if the whole of theology begins to allow itself to be reworked from its foundation in the Trinity, perichoresis, and communion.”⁴¹ The Christian God, the one who revealed Godself in Jesus Christ, is communion and perichoresis and opens us to a new theological paradigm, namely communion as an expression of the Trinitarian mystery: “The Second Vatican Council has begun to imprint a new Copernican turn capable of overcoming the old paradigms of substance and subject, which are already shown today to be radically insufficient to account for the enormous complexity and plurality of reality.”⁴²

This new focus on communion between God and humankind leads us to understand that we are part of an intertwined world. But this bond is not marginal and superficial, rather “the roots of the Church are Trinitarian and therefore interrelational, that is: they are the Trinitarian relations of a prolonged ‘going out’ through the missions of the Son and the Holy Spirit.”⁴³ This has immense consequences for understanding creation: “For Christians, believing in one God who is trinitarian

⁴⁰ Gonzalo Zarazaga, “La comunión trinitaria. La contribución de Karl Rahner,” *Estudios eclesiásticos* 80, no. 313 (2005): 267.

⁴¹ Gonzalo Zarazaga, “Aportes para una teología de comunión. En torno a la contribución de Gisbert Greshake,” *Stromata* 62 (2006): 151.

⁴² Zarazaga, “La comunión trinitaria,” 265.

⁴³ Scannone, *Hacia una Iglesia sinodal y una cultura del encuentro*, 107.

communion suggests that the Trinity has left its mark on all creation” (*Laudato Si’*, no. 239), which leads to the conclusion that “*each creature bears in itself a specifically Trinitarian structure*” (*Laudato Si’*, no. 239).⁴⁴ As a mirror of the Trinity, the created world can be understood as a “web of relationships.”⁴⁵

Since we are created in the image and likeness of a God who is communion and relationship, communion and relationship constitute us ontologically. John Zizioulas speaks of communion being an “ontological category,” since “there is no true being without communion. Nothing exists as an individual, conceivable by itself.”⁴⁶ This is the foundation of the bond that unites us all with everyone and with everything: “If God’s being is radically relational, then this suggests that reality is relational to the core.”⁴⁷ This has consequences, as Colin Gunton points out, for how we understand the human person:

Human being in the image of God is to be understood relationally rather than in terms of the possession of fixed characteristics such as reason or will, as has been the almost universal tendency of the tradition. By this I mean that the reality of the human creature must be understood in terms of the human relation to God, in the first instance, and to the rest of creation in the second.⁴⁸

Thus, moral theology’s most important challenge is to read reality in a Trinitarian key, in a relational key, and to act accordingly. This relational key also needs to be applied to the human person: “To be a person is to be oriented toward communion.”⁴⁹ And we would say that it also has communal, social, political, and ecological implications, repercussions,

⁴⁴ The Italics in the original refer to a quotation from St. Bonaventure.

⁴⁵ Scannone, *Hacia una Iglesia sinodal y una cultura del encuentro*, 108–109.

⁴⁶ John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1993), 17.

⁴⁷ Denis Edwards, *Breath of Life: A Theology of the Creator Spirit* (Orbis Books, 2004), 94.

⁴⁸ Colin E. Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many: God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 3.

⁴⁹ Edwards, *Breath of Life*, 95.

and consequences, in such a way that we are faced with the challenge of generating links, rebuilding, and renewing community commitment. As Zizioulas notes, individualistic approaches contradict the ontology of the human being. Relationality encompasses the cosmic, the social, and the divine world because “an existence of communion in otherness, is not a matter of our *bene esse* but of the very *esse* of ourselves and of the world in which we live.”⁵⁰

In other words, and as Pope Francis insists, it is a matter of working to generate a true culture of encounter (*Fratelli Tutti*, no. 215; *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 237). However, we must bear in mind that communion is only built on difference, that is, on otherness, on plurality, not on homogeneity; therefore, it is not an easy task. This is especially so because in Western culture the other often appears to be an enemy: “We accept the other only in so far as he or she does not threaten our privacy or in so far as he or she is useful for our individual happiness.”⁵¹

This issue raised by Zizioulas is not a minor issue, especially when we address the violence that results from the rupture and deterioration of these deep ties that unite us: “There is a pathology built into the very roots of our existence, inherited through our birth, and that is *the fear of the other*,” which “is in fact nothing but the fear of the different; we all want somehow to project into the other the model of our own selves, which shows how deeply rooted in our existence the fear of the other is.”⁵² Fear of otherness results in “identifying difference with division” with the result that “we divide our lives and human beings according to difference” which can easily turn “into conflict and confrontation as soon as those interests cease to coincide.”⁵³ Our societies and our world situation amply witness to this today.

⁵⁰ John D. Zizioulas, “Relational Ontology: Insights from Patristic Thought,” in *The Trinity and an Entangled World: Relationality in Physical Science and Theology*, ed. J. Polkinghorne (Eerdmans, 2010), 156.

⁵¹ Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, 1.

⁵² Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, 1–2.

⁵³ Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, 2.

It is really shocking how fear of the other, fear of difference, and fear of otherness are generators of atrocious and monstrous violence in us, in our communities, and in our society. All forms of discrimination are a clear sign of rejection of the other, who we consider different and therefore as a threat, a competition, and a rival. To value difference and rebuild broken ties by strengthening community engagement presents a tremendous challenge for intercultural moral theology.

Conclusion

At this point and by way of conclusion, we believe that it is necessary to pose some questions that this challenging task of building an intercultural moral theology leaves us with. A question that remains on the table is whether we can consider interculturality as an overcoming of inculturation. In many cases, moral theology has developed from the paradigm of inculturation or, on some occasions, transculturation. The weight, strength, and emphasis of the processes have not been centered on the Gospel but on the imposition of a culture that is considered superior. In this process, religion became an important mechanism of control.

If moral theology has begun the transition from inculturation to interculturality then the intercultural paradigm and cultural differences, with their corresponding ethical and religious implications, should not be considered a threat but a benefit. Along these lines, we can ask ourselves if intercultural ethics would then be a matter of respect for difference, or common minimum ethical standards, or a consensus? Dussel noted that consensus can conceal deep mechanisms of oppression and exclusion.⁵⁴ It is therefore a question of going beyond a simple consensus because it is a question of building a common project on the basis of communion.

What is clear is that moral theology can no longer ignore cultural pluralism since it constitutes an important aspect of the historical context

⁵⁴ Juan M. Zielinski, "De la inculturación a la interculturalidad: Crítica intercultural a la filosofía y teología inculturadas de Juan Carlos Scannone," *Revista de Epistemología y Ciencias Humanas* 6 (2014): 190.

we live in today. This pluralism is a demand that cannot be avoided and therefore presents a challenge. A hermeneutic of one's own tradition is necessary given its relationship with the traditions of the other.⁵⁵ So, on what hermeneutical bases should an intercultural moral theology be built? Should interculturality be understood as a method that helps a process of interaction and communication that favors intercultural dialogue in theology?

When we talk about intercultural dialogue, it is important to make clear our understanding of culture, and here we opt for the definition of Juan Carlos Scannone, who interprets culture as a form of living together of a human group. Culture, for this author, refers to the human way of inhabiting the world, which encompasses the use of utensils, customs, significant symbolic structures, values, rules of action and interaction.⁵⁶ This approach to the category of culture as the human way of inhabiting the world gives us the occasion to think in terms of an intercultural, ethical, and historical "we," such that we can recognize the plurality of cultures and the value and richness of diversity. Hence, culture encourages us to understand the connections between cultures and recognize that, while our expressions differ, we are not so different from one another. We can discover this in dialogue that "tends to a more profound conversion of each one to God. The same God speaks in the hearts of both partners; the same Spirit is at work in all."⁵⁷

The shift from inculturation to interculturality requires us to situate ourselves on the horizon of the other, on the horizon of a relational theology, on the horizon of a theology of communion, because dialogue is only possible if the other is considered as a valid interlocutor. So, as we have already pointed out, the intercultural turn of moral theology must go

⁵⁵ Raúl Fornet Betancourt, "El quehacer teológico en el contexto del diálogo entre las culturas en América Latina," *Revista Iberoamericana de Teología* 3, no. 4 (2007): 75–76, 79.

⁵⁶ Juan C. Scannone, "Normas éticas en la relación entre culturas," in *Filosofía de la cultura*, ed. D. Sobrevilla, *Enciclopedia Iberoamericana de Filosofía*, no. 15 (Editorial Trotta, 1998), 226. See also Zielinski, "De la inculturación a la interculturalidad," 198.

⁵⁷ Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Orbis Books, 2000), 383.

beyond minimum ethical norms because what is at stake is the encounter with the other, becoming aware that we are all interdependent because ontologically our being constitutes a trinitarian structure of communion.



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3. Human Dignity, Cultural Norms, and the Good for All: Toward a Dialogical Method in Intercultural Theological Ethics

Sigrid Müller

The Necessity of Intercultural Theological Ethics

Intercultural theological ethics is not a specific theological ethic. Rather, being intercultural in today's world is simply a feature of theological ethics as such, or at least it should be. Today, we encounter an "unprecedented degree of interaction between the diverse peoples and cultures of the world."¹ Other cultures are more present in our lives today—not only because media and digital sources make distant continents more visible but also because people now travel more easily and frequently. In addition, migration and the growth of Christian populations outside Europe have shifted global attention. Pope Francis created cardinals "from the margins," thereby throwing light on areas of the Catholic church that formerly received less attention. The coexistence of traits from different cultures within the same local area, along with their mutual influence, reveals that culture has two sides: it is both a living practice and a reflection on that practice—an interplay that is crucial for minimizing the oppressive dimensions often associated with culture.²

As globalization heightens the need for an intercultural ethics, new borders are being delineated. New processes of self-definition in formerly colonized cultures introduce a critical distance towards "Western" values and concepts, as well as add a new dimension to the relationship between

¹ Bruce Grelle, "Culture and Moral Pluralism," in *The Blackwell Companion to Religious Ethics*, ed. W. Schweiker (Blackwell, 2005), 129.

²² Regina Ammicht-Quinn, "Kulturethik," in *Handbuch Ethik*, ed. M. Düwell, C. Hübenenthal and M. H. Werner, 2nd ed. (Metzler, 2006), 264–269.

culture, reasoning, and faith. Such processes have been recognized by liberation theologies as “attempts of the dispossessed to regain the right of self-determination and self-definition.”³ This increases awareness of the need for a global discourse on what is good for all human beings in light of today’s ethical challenges.⁴

It is about *what* we pay attention to—namely, the different moral attitudes and norms at work in different regions of the world—and also about *how* we reflect on ethical questions. Intercultural theological ethics pays attention to how Christian authors use their cultural framework and the Christian gospel to interpret their moral experience. Its main task is to reflect on unity and plurality in ethical practice. It does not replace other sources, such as the expert knowledge required for specific ethical questions; rather, it seeks to provide a framework for cross-cultural dialogue and the search for moral solutions.

Understanding Universal Foundations and Goals as Part of the Christian Ethical Tradition

This contribution deals with the tension that exists between cultural plurality, on one side, and the quest for unity in theology, on the other side. Culture represents lived reality, shaped by symbolic systems that vary across different parts of the world, and therefore naturally exists only in a state of diversity. While we normally see culture as regionally defined,

³ Laurenti Magesa, “The Political Axis of African Liberation Theology,” in *Liberation Theologies on Shifting Grounds: A Clash of Socio-Economic and Cultural Paradigms*, ed. G. De Schrijver (Leuven, 1998), 144.

⁴ Such tendencies also find expression within ecclesial ethics. An example is the reaction of the African bishops’ conference on the declaration of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Fiducia Supplicans. On the Pastoral Meaning of Blessings*, Dec. 18, 2023. SECAM: “No blessing for homosexual couples in all Churches in Africa,” January 11, 2024, secam.org/5924/. SECAM refers to the cultural tradition to strengthen its position: “In addition to these biblical reasons, the cultural context in Africa, deeply rooted in natural law values regarding marriage and family, further complicates the acceptance of same-sex unions, as they are seen as contradictory to norms cultural and intrinsically bad.”

Christian theology links all cultural expressions to one shared foundation and focus point: God, the creator who is both the founder and the goal of life. All ethics is therefore oriented towards the moral good for all creation and, in this sense, is universal because it transcends any particular action. Believing in one God who created all creatures motivates us to seek solutions that respect everyone.

The tension between the local and the global, the particular and the universal, is not new. It has been constituent of theological ethics from the first centuries of the church until today. Theological ethics of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries can refer to St. Thomas Aquinas when they explain that the more general the level of moral reflection, the more formal it must be, so that the highest moral principles or virtues—such as justice, courage, generosity, or prudence, or imperatives such as “you should do good and avoid evil”—are highly abstract and general. They were used, with the help of “anthropological constants,” to formulate particular norms that are embedded in and shaped by culture, law, and historical situations.⁵ In this model, a top-down process is at work that leads from the abstract to the particular.⁶

The uniting force of such universal principles has been recently challenged. The first reason is postcolonial skepticism: universal principles are seen as biased because their origin lies within a specific cultural and historical tradition.⁷ A second reason is multiculturalism, which argues that if all cultures are equally valid, there is no need to search for shared principles at a higher level. A third reason is that universal principles do

⁵ See, for example, Lisa Sowle Cahill’s summary of Schillebeeckx’s and Aquinas’s concepts of “anthropological constants” in “The Natural Law, Global Justice, and equality,” in *Searching for a Universal Ethic: Multidisciplinary, Ecumenical, and Interfaith Responses to the Catholic Natural Law Tradition*, ed. J. Berkman and W. C. Mattison (Eerdmans, 2014), 105–106.

⁶ Karl-Wilhelm Merks offers an account of elements of theological ethics that can help to deal with universalism and particularism and theological anthropology. See Karl-Wilhelm Merks, *Grundlinien einer interkulturellen Ethik. Moral zwischen Pluralismus und Universalität*, Studien zur theologischen Ethik 132 (Academic Press/Paulusverlag, 2012).

⁷ Grelle, “Culture and Moral Pluralism,” 133, refers to “the decision of the executive board of the American Anthropological Association (1947) not to endorse the United Nations ‘Declaration on the Rights of Man’ on the grounds that it was an ethnocentric document.”

not exist as abstract entities but instead are always interpreted within the framework of culture and thereby lose their universal character. They become more specific and varied and are therefore less able to fulfill their uniting function. Nevertheless, the uniting force of these general principles still plays an important role in global ethics and therefore should not be discarded too quickly.⁸

Difficulties arise because, after a long history of political subjugation, even humanitarian programs that insist on minimal conditions—such as requiring the legal abolition of female circumcision—can give the impression that ethics is being used as a tool of political power. This perception can obscure the deeper ethical question of whether certain norms and customs genuinely promote human well-being and whether they continue to reflect the community's current understanding of life's meaning.

However, to discard the idea of universality alone because of its Western origin cuts off options of dialogue because it leads to a multiculturalist attitude that restricts itself to reflection for a cultural group. Such a self-restriction also has no recourse to a "higher" level, in the sense of a more universal and abstract argument, to bring about changes within one's own culture. Renouncing dialoguing about universal principles also loses the right to make suggestions of how to promote the good for all and to stimulate changes in other cultures.

Sincere and open dialogue that seeks the good for all also offers a learning opportunity. This in turn fosters communication that is aimed at enhancing the good for all. As Bruce Grelle concludes, "An approach to religious ethics that takes culture seriously must seek to analyze moral discourses in the context of cultures as a whole, in the context of struggles for hegemony among competing social groups within and between

⁸ I share Grelle's view as expressed in "Culture and Moral Pluralism": discarding a search for the universal good and embracing multiculturalism weakens ethics. As he writes, "It is a mistake to conclude from this that a pluralistic approach necessitates the abandonment of efforts to develop moral languages that both recognize the irreducibility of cultural and moral diversity while also seeking to identify values that can be shared in common across cultures." Grelle, "Culture and Moral Pluralism," 133.

cultures, and in the context of a recognition of the practical need to develop ways of speaking about a common good even while recognizing the irreducible cultural and moral diversity of the world in which we live.”⁹

Expressing the Universal Foundation and Goal of Christian Ethics: Human Dignity and Moral Good

In the first centuries of Christianity, and throughout the Middle Ages, we find reflections on how the particular and the universal relate to each other—not only metaphysically, but also ethically. Inspired by Stoic, Platonic, and Aristotelian thought, theologians of the first centuries have developed ideas such as the existence of an eternal law in which all people participate through the use of reason; that all Christians, by listening to their heart and contemplating eternal truth, can discern what leads to the highest good; and that the different life paths of people are ultimately directed toward the same goal of eternal happiness in the vision of God. While distinct from one another, each ethical approach suggests there is a focal point that unites all human beings. Over the centuries, the scope of Christian ethics has expanded, most notably with the discovery of the Americas in early modernity, which led to the recognition that people from different cultures all possess human dignity.¹⁰ To this day, theologians draw on traditional concepts (e.g., natural law) that express what all human beings share, adapting them to contemporary contexts.¹¹

It is clear, though, that these ethical approaches have grown out of a dialogue between ancient Greek and Roman philosophy and the Christian

⁹ Grelle, “Culture and Moral Pluralism,” 135.

¹⁰ Hans Schelkshorn, *Rethinking European Modernity: Reason, Power, and Coloniality in Early Modern Thought* (Bloomsbury, 2025).

¹¹ Cahill explains that natural law can be reconciled with cultural pluralism “by stipulating that all readings of ‘universals’ are contextual and experience-based. To grant that natural law reasoning is always historical creates tension with the defense of natural law in a specifically Catholic ecclesial context. The consequences of historicity for moral reasoning are easier for the tradition to absorb regarding social justice than in areas once termed ‘personal’ morality, such as sexual ethics and bioethics.” Cahill, “The Natural Law,” 105.

faith tradition. They are testimonies to the inculturation of the gospel in Europe and can serve as examples of a Christian ethics adapted in Europe.¹² This specific origin does not provide sufficient grounds for judging the validity of universal arguments for problem-solving in a global world. Finding similar universal elements in other cultures can deepen their interpretation and enrich their application.¹³ It even seems to me that one of the most important ethical claims in Christianity is precisely the universality of human dignity and the moral good. Human dignity can serve to denote the universal anthropological foundation of Christian ethics, and the moral good can serve as a universal criterion for moral action even if this principle, when it is put into everyday practice, can only find particular and limited expressions.

These two elements of ethics, which describe the foundation (the human person and their dignity without distinction) and the purpose of Christian ethics (the good for all), seem to be what Christian theological ethics should uphold, including when it engages in intercultural theological ethics. However, a simple look at the development of the concept of human dignity within the Christian tradition¹⁴ shows that it has developed over the entire history of Christianity, and its interpretation, like the notion of human rights,¹⁵ is still in a process. Yet, it can serve as a

¹² For a description of what inculturation means for theology, see Laurenti Magesa, “Inculturation Theology in Africa,” in *A New History of African Christian Thought: From Cape to Cairo*, ed. D. T. Ngong (Routledge, 2017), 109–121.

¹³ For universal aspects in African Bantu ethics, see Michal Sia Tesha, “Human Dignity as Basic Foundation for Morality in Perspective of ‘Bantu’ African Ethical Theory (With Specific Moral Challenges in Tanzania)” (STL Thesis, University of Vienna, 2019), 147–158, 199. On these pages, he characterizes the Bantu approach as a bottom-up virtue ethical approach to human dignity that is complementary to an abstract Kantian top-down approach.

¹⁴ See, for example, Sigrid Müller, “Concepts and Dimensions of Human Dignity in the Christian Tradition,” *Journal for Religion and Transformation* 6, no. 1 (2020): 22–55, doi.org/10.30965/23642807-00601003.

¹⁵ The fact that each culture interprets abstract notions in light of its own anthropology and worldview is also obvious with respect to widely acknowledged human rights. Grelle argues: “There remain tensions and disagreements between the particular moralities of cultures and the ‘universal’ morality of human rights—especially with regard to the rights of women, children, and homosexuals—just as there remain tensions within human rights discourse itself between civil-

symbol of the conviction that all human beings have something in common, share the same basic needs, and therefore should be treated equally.¹⁶ Thus, it is worthwhile to seek similar expressions of respect for the human being in different cultures.

Similarly, in the political realm, human rights have provided a moral language that many use when it comes to solving problems through collective effort. They are a helpful tool for communication and have become “a kind of ‘moral creole,’” though “this does not mean that human rights can substitute for or replace these richer, more specific and complex moral languages.”¹⁷ As the Korean philosopher Yersu Kim argues, human rights language can function effectively as something like a Kantian “regulative idea”: “The concept of the universality of human rights for our age of diversity must be one that can preserve respect for cultures in their uniqueness while leaving open the possibility of progress and development.”¹⁸

The challenge of doing intercultural theological ethics, therefore, lies in developing exchange not only at the abstract but also at a concrete level—where moral ideas receive the form of practical norms being shaped by cultural influences and where we create structures of the good in our societies through our actions, customs, and institutions. However, before reflecting on how we can best engage in discourse about different cultural approaches to specific ethical problems, it is helpful to consider how close

political rights, social-economic rights, and cultural-developmental rights. . . . The international human rights movement illustrates that it is sometimes possible, through dialogue and negotiation (rather than through some form of *a priori* philosophical analysis), to identify common interests shared by disparate groups with alternative cultural and moral orientations.” Grelle, “Culture and Moral Pluralism,” 134–135, italics original.

¹⁶ This is also the meaning of natural law which is important for Catholic moral tradition. As Cahill describes: “At its most basic, natural law is simply the idea that human beings are similar enough in their needs and priorities to agree at a fundamental yet politically potent level about what constitutes good or bad treatment of other people, and good or bad organization of society.” Cahill, “The Natural Law,” 105.

¹⁷ Grelle, “Culture and Moral Pluralism,” 133–134.

¹⁸ Yersu Kim, “Entwicklung von Universalität: Zur Begründung der Universalität von Menschenrechten,” *Polylog* 14 (2005): 65. My translation.

we can come to identifying a shared foundation, what we truly have in common.

The Foundation of Intercultural Ethics: Basic Moral Intuitions Embedded in Different Cultures

For the question of how we can presuppose that we all have common ground on a fundamental ethical level, we can build on the insights of a philosophical dialogue between European discourse ethics and Latin American philosophy, as carried out by my colleague Hans Schelkshorn.¹⁹ Based on a critique of Habermas, he argues that the rules of discourse already presuppose an ethical intuition that motivates participants to search for justice and the good for all, as well as to engage in dialogue. In his investigation, Schelkshorn describes the basic moral intuition of all human beings as the “well-being of human and non-human life.”²⁰

It is due to the different cultures in which we live that this basic moral intuition takes on different shapes as it unfolds into normative guidance for the various practices in our societies. If we want to develop joint activities and policies to find solutions across the borders of continents and cultures, it is helpful to remember that all the different approaches share common ground, such as that we all wish to protect life and the well-being of living beings. This basic conviction, according to Schelkshorn, entails two poles. The first is care for survival, which includes “ensuring survival as such and basic standards of social and cultural reproduction of life.”²¹ The second pole is the “‘destination’ of human life in this world,” which is spelled out in “basic duties of shared life and foundational values that

¹⁹ Hans Schelkshorn, “Dialogische Vernunft und die Grundlagen interkultureller Ethik: Thesen zu einer Revision der Diskursethik,” in *Perspektiven der Diskursethik*, ed. N. Gottschalk-Mazouz (Königshausen & Neumann, 2004), 203–235.

²⁰ Schelkshorn, “Dialogische Vernunft,” 213.

²¹ Schelkshorn, “Dialogische Vernunft,” 213. My translation.

orient individual and social life throughout,”²² and which human beings need to assume freely.²³

The two poles (preservation and destination of life) cannot be reduced to each other. As Schelkshorn argues, we understand our destination—i.e., that which makes sense in life—only with the help of concepts and traditions that are not reducible to rational arguments because these interpretative elements extend beyond individual lives,²⁴ being transmitted over generations. According to Schelkshorn, even secular morality has such sacred or quasi-sacral roots, the experience of which is often expressed by reference to human dignity.²⁵

If we enter into dialogue among cultures, we presuppose that there is a shared fundamental moral intuition, which relates to the preservation of life and to an interpretive framework that supports the moral intuition and unfolds it. However, we cannot presuppose that each framework has already been made communicable for rational discourse with the help of definitions and systematic reflections. Some worldviews that are only transmitted orally have become a focus of interest more recently, especially in the field of ecological ethics.²⁶ The challenge consists in understanding and communicating between these different worldviews that shape the way in which universal basic intuitions are transformed into rules and norms of our everyday lives, which, in their variety, are present in intercultural dialogue.

²² Schelkshorn, “Dialogische Vernunft,” 213. My translation.

²³ Schelkshorn, “Dialogische Vernunft,” 214.

²⁴ Schelkshorn, “Dialogische Vernunft,” 228.

²⁵ Schelkshorn, “Dialogische Vernunft,” 228–229.

²⁶ On the importance of oral tradition for African philosophy, see Niels Weidtmann, “Kann Schriftlichkeit fehlen? Afrikanische Weisheitslehren im interkulturellen Dialog,” *Polylog* 1 (1998): 74–84.

Culture: The Complex and Dynamic “In-Between”

As Schelkshorn explains, assumptions about the destination of life that direct our ideas of what is good for human beings do not primarily consist of rational ethical arguments but of fundamental convictions embedded in worldviews. Clifford Geertz defines such worldviews as a “picture of the way things in sheer actuality are, their concept of nature, of self, of society,” and which contain “their most comprehensive ideas of order.”²⁷ Worldviews convey a specific understanding of who the human being is, which can be the cause of considerable anthropological differences. For example, Volker Küster refers to the individual person before God in monotheistic religions; the integration of the human being in the cosmos in primal and Chinese religions; the negation of the individual in religions of Indian origin like Buddhism and Hinduism; and the strictly hierarchical societal model for interpreting the human being as the implications of the Hinduist.²⁸

The Second Vatican Council describes culture in terms of the structures that establish and form all activities: “Different styles of life and multiple scales of values arise from the diverse manner of using things, of laboring, of expressing oneself, of practicing religion, of forming customs, of establishing laws and juridic institutions, of cultivating the sciences, the arts and beauty;” from such a “definite, historical milieu,” humanity “draws the values which permit him to promote civilization” (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 54).

This shows how personal insights and experiences are embedded in a worldview that provides an interpretative framework and shapes actions and societal structures. Worldviews can be based on culture and religion, which offer images and language to express what makes sense in life. In this way, they help to motivate and strengthen moral commitment. Since

²⁷ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (Basic Books, 1973), 127. See also Grelle, “Culture and Moral Pluralism,” 130.

²⁸ Volker Küster, “Ethik in interkultureller Perspektive,” in *Was ist theologische Ethik?*, ed. M. Roth and M. Held (De Gruyter, 2018), 289–301, 293, doi.org/10.1515/9783110565980-017.

moral motivation and judgment are connected, we never only exchange rational arguments in ethical discussions but also share (at least implicitly) our cultural-anthropological framework, which creates the “horizon” for our moral discernment. As Grelle concludes, “On this view, the study of religious ethics should focus not only on forms of moral reasoning but also on forms of life, not only on moral argument and justification but also on the full range of ‘normative activity that creates and sustains an ethos.’”²⁹

We learn from these insights that there is no “neutral” Christian faith. It is always embedded in culture, and culture is not a “neutral” entity either. They shape each other. In this sense, in some regions, such as Africa, Christianity is not only immersed in an African culture but in a culture deeply influenced by primal religion. This is why intercultural theological-ethical dialogue in its strict sense—that is concerned with the diversity of Christian expressions of faith³⁰—can easily transform into an interreligious ethical dialogue.

Beyond recognizing mutual religious and cultural influences, we can generally say that culture can and should no longer be regarded as homogeneous, even if we picture it as such. Wanda Deifelt describes how a “false” homogeneity is produced by drawing on Seyla Benhabib’s description of a “social observer” who “imposes, together with local elites, unity and coherence on cultures as observed entities . . . for the purposes of understanding and control.”³¹ Deifelt postulates that otherness must be taken into account because “the eagerness to affirm ‘sameness’ . . . might overlook important internal struggles or challenges” and “the ethical deliberation that is already at play within cultures.”³²

²⁹ Grelle, “Culture and Moral Pluralism,” 130. He refers to Frank E. Reynolds, “Four Modes of Theravāda Action,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 7, no. 1 (1979): 23.

³⁰ Küster, “Ethik in interkultureller Perspektive,” 290. Küster distinguishes between intercultural theology in the sense of (1) interdenominational differences, (2) diversity of faith worldwide, and (3) interreligious encounter.

³¹ Wanda Deifelt, “Intercultural Ethics: Sameness and Otherness Revisited,” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 46, no. 2 (2007): 113, with reference to Seyla Benhabib, *Claims of Culture* (Princeton University Press, 2002), 5.

³² Deifelt, “Intercultural Ethics,” 116, 118.

Deifelt explains that the temptation to create homogeneity can, however, also originate from a “defender” of a culture “to deflect legitimate ethical critique,” or “to ascertain difference in relation to other cultural values (perceived as normative), whereas sameness with an external culture can be dismissed as not pertaining to local habits or traditions.”³³ Instead, cultures should be regarded as “webs of meaning and significance . . . [that] also embody contradictory and dissenting voices, constantly requiring assessment and ethical reflection.”³⁴

Intercultural Theological Ethics as Methodologically Reflected Dialogue

By taking the permeability of culture and the possibility of mutual learning seriously, many scholars conclude that, similarly to intercultural theology, intercultural theological ethics should also be understood as a practice and method of dialogue. The following models—one theological and one theological-ethical—show how we can approach such a dialogical discipline.

An “In-Between-Theology” (Wrogemann): Faith Stimulating a Negotiation of Norms

The Protestant intercultural theologian Henning Wrogemann argues that intercultural theology “emerged out of the field of mission studies,”³⁵ but it should not be regarded as a simple continuation, nor as “a collection discipline” showing “the diversity of Christianity.”³⁶ Nor should intercultural theology be restricted to theological studies from experts in the global South. Rather, it should integrate all kinds of theological

³³ Deifelt, “Intercultural Ethics,” 117.

³⁴ Deifelt, “Intercultural Ethics,” 118.

³⁵ Henning Wrogemann, “Intercultural Theology as In-Between Theology,” *Religions* 12, no. 11 (2021): 1, doi.org/10.3390/rel12111014.

³⁶ Wrogemann, “Intercultural Theology,” 1.

expressions and include societal and other contexts, and even as it concentrates on Christianity as a methodological matter, it should not be overly beholden to denominational differences.³⁷ He argues that intercultural theology should not be merely descriptive (comparative anthropology) but also normative.³⁸ It should lead to negotiation between the universal and the local, with conflicting explanations adjudicated by shared beliefs. In the Christian context, such an endeavor is “motivated by the claim to universal validity of its message of salvation.”³⁹

Similar dynamics have emerged in the Synod on Synodality with regard to the question of homosexuality and polygamy. The dignity of the human person is interpreted differently by the participating persons, and since neither the Global North nor South holds uniform views—each is composed of different, shifting majorities—this is an exemplary case of cultural hybridity that underscores the need to enter into dialogue with one another. This dialogue can take on many different forms and involve various layers of reflection, which is why Wrogemann calls intercultural theology an “in-between theology.”⁴⁰

“Border-crossing” (Stan Chu Ilo): Encounter of Different Subjects in Search of a Common Meaning

In a similar way, Stan Chu Ilo stresses the importance of experiential encounter in faith, through sharing “the Word of God received in faith and the love of God revealed in Christ and experienced in personal,

³⁷ Wrogemann, “Intercultural Theology,” 1–2.

³⁸ Wrogemann, “Intercultural Theology,” 3.

³⁹ Wrogemann, “Intercultural Theology,” 3. Wrogemann refers further to his book *Intercultural Theology*, vol. 3: *A Theology of Interreligious Relations* (IVP Academic, 2019), 441–442.

⁴⁰ As examples of the “in-between,” Wrogemann offers the academy and grassroots level, explicit and implicit theology (media), semiotics and discourse, descriptive and normative, unity and diversity, local and translocal. Wrogemann, “Intercultural Theology,” 4–7.

ecclesial, communal or cultural life.”⁴¹ Such a dialogue requires openness to epistemological engagement, which enables understanding of different regions and the “voices of ordinary people.”⁴² He summarizes, “Viewed in this light, border-crossing in intercultural theology is a comparative search for common meaning and some family traits of faith and practices between different culturally defined subjects.”⁴³

Ilo grounds his approach in the idea of divine pedagogy (*synkatabasis*) by which “God condescends, becomes kenotic to embrace human nature and the complexities of history” and “shatters the restrictive cultural borders which could separate us from God and from others.”⁴⁴ However, dealing with the complexity of inculturated faith is only a first step. Ilo’s vision is that the “Christianity of the future will be a faith which will work together with other faiths, and indeed with entire humanity, in the search for human and cosmic flourishing.”⁴⁵

An Ethics of Sameness and Otherness for Hybrid Cultures (Wanda Deifelt)

Wanda Deifelt develops her ethics of sameness and otherness within an intercultural Lutheran dialogue. Sameness and otherness appear both within and between cultures. She describes intercultural dialogue as constantly crossing boundaries:

Sameness was perceived primarily with the daily struggles for survival, the continuity of the species, the administration of natural resources,

⁴¹ Stan Chu Ilo, “Currents in World Christianity and the Challenges of Border-Crossing and Intercultural Theology,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 158 (2017): 43. Italics in the original have been removed.

⁴² Ilo, “Currents in World Christianity,” 47, quoting Walter D. Mignolo, “Colonial and Postcolonial Discourse: Cultural Critique or Academic Colonialism,” *Latin American Research Review* 28, no. 3 (1993): 124.

⁴³ Ilo, “Currents in World Christianity,” 52. Emphasis removed.

⁴⁴ Ilo, “Currents in World Christianity,” 50.

⁴⁵ Ilo, “Currents in World Christianity,” 44, quoting Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (University of Toronto Press, 1971), 362.

and the overall polity of human life. On the other hand, moments of estrangement and cognitive dissonance were experienced when members expounded on the particularity of each of the categories that enabled sameness. In other words, the concerns were similar, but the way of going about them often differed and required constant negotiation (both within and among cultures).⁴⁶

Deifelt uses “otherness” in a twofold way. Drawing on Levinas’ understanding of the other as the “absolute other,”⁴⁷ she warns that “cultures are not projections of our own worldviews” and that “there is equality precisely because the other is not reduced to one’s own terms and parameters.”⁴⁸ By referring to Enrique Dussel’s use of otherness to denote the less seen, less privileged other, she emphasizes the “dignity and freedom of all the members of the community, particularly those who are not representative of normative discourse or beneficiaries of structures of political and economic power.”⁴⁹

Attitudes and Norms for Practicing Intercultural Theological Ethics

The three approaches presented all lead to the claim that, for intercultural theological ethics to be successful, certain aspects need to be respected and some personal attitudes cultivated. I will briefly summarize four aspects and attitudes.

⁴⁶ Deifelt, “Intercultural Ethics,” 118.

⁴⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Duquesne University Press, 1969).

⁴⁸ Deifelt, “Intercultural Ethics,” 118.

⁴⁹ Deifelt, “Intercultural Ethics,” 118. She refers to Enrique Dussel, *Ethics and Community* (Orbis Books, 1988).

Analyze the Call to Universality with Regard to the Intention and Interests Involved

As Grelle shows, a critical examination of the intention behind claims to universality is important because such claims can be used “in self-serving, ethnocentric, imperialistic fashions” and therefore “should be opposed.” They should be welcomed, however, when used to “find common moral ground in the midst of conflict and competition.”⁵⁰

Create Space for Other Voices, Own Your Upbringing, and Resist Centralization

The detection of power structures is a first step toward discovering what impedes critical voices from being heard, either within a culture or from outside,⁵¹ because dominant groups in society define what is “normal.”⁵² To make the existing plurality visible, it is vital to use “voluntary self-ascription” instead of automatically assigning persons “to a cultural, religious, or linguistic group by virtue of birth.”⁵³ This is a requirement for a sincere dialogue so that participants can “own’ their cultural upbringing and be accountable to it (a process of self-disclosure), be willing to critically reflect on these values (a process of self-awareness), and be open to listen to different interpretations of certain practices and norms (a process of self-assessment).”⁵⁴ In a more political sense, Marilyn J. Legge, in her reflections on an intercultural public sphere, recommends using the

⁵⁰ Grelle, “Culture and Moral Pluralism,” 135.

⁵¹ As Deifelt writes: “It is easy to dismiss challenges when they appear to be articulated by external influence (their authoritative claim is not acknowledged because these critiques are, allegedly, not supported from within the culture).” Deifelt, “Intercultural Ethics,” 118.

⁵² Grelle, “Culture and Moral Pluralism,” 130–131. He refers to Joseph Femia, “Hegemony and Consciousness in the Thought of Antonio Gramsci,” *Political Studies* 23, no. 1 (1975): 30–31.

⁵³ Deifelt, “Intercultural Ethics,” 117.

⁵⁴ Deifelt describes the conditions of such a dialogue: “This exercise required ethical reflection. As participants of particular cultures, we engaged in intentional conversation, deliberation, and transparency about what is considered moral, right, or good according to our own cultures and traditions.” Deifelt, “Intercultural Ethics,” 115.

imaginative power to create new spaces of encounter that resist centralization.⁵⁵ Recognition of differences and their appreciation can help us discern where we need to seek universal solutions and where polycentric structures can coexist.⁵⁶

Exercise Radical Openness and a Hermeneutic of Humility and Generosity

Ilo sees a huge need for “radical openness, receptivity and sensitivity to other voices on the part of theologians and openness to diversity by faith-communities locally and globally.”⁵⁷ This is the way of enriching theology through voices that have been previously marginalized. It also means recognizing that every culture’s contribution is “an incomplete story. . . . Good theologies are the fruits of the hermeneutics of humility and generosity because they proceed from a perspective of incompleteness and are constantly open to seeing the path of God in uncharted territories.”⁵⁸ Such attitudes can be cultivated in the formation of theologians.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Marilyn J. Legge, “In the Company of God and One Another’: Feminist Theo-ethics, Heterogeneous Publics and Intercultural Churches,” in *Public Theology and the Challenge of Feminism*, ed. S. Burns and A. Monro (Routledge, 2015), 54.

⁵⁶ Catalina Cerda-Planas, “Zur Spannung zwischen Universalität und Kontextualität der katholischen Kirche: Überlegungen auf der Grundlage der empirisch-theologischen Studie ‘Synodaler Weg, weltkirchliche Perspektiven,’” in *Performing Christianities: Differenzfähigkeit des Christlichen in einer globalen Weltgesellschaft*, ed. K. Karl, J. van Loon, and M. Kirschner (Nomos, 2024), 409–416, 416.

⁵⁷ Ilo, “Currents in World Christianity,” 53.

⁵⁸ Ilo, “Currents in World Christianity,” 53.

⁵⁹ Robert W. Heimburger, Samuel Efrain Murillo Torres, and James Wesley Sam, “Teaching Christian Ethics Beyond Europe and North America: From a Postgraduate Research Seminar to a Theology of Listening,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 37, no. 1 (2024): 93–110.

Enable Transformative Practice through Relationships and Networks of Significance

Ilo describes how transformation can take place: “When processed in light of new information, the familiar is reframed, and new understandings arise within the community so that transformation ‘makes sense.’ . . . Relationship is always a two-way street; local people come to see things from a different perspective, as do message bearers; everyone comes away changed.”⁶⁰ Deifelt points to the importance of “creating networks of significance that can simultaneously draw from particular cultures yet also establish similarities or commonalities for the benefit of transformative praxis.”⁶¹ She stresses the importance of networks with participants who encourage each other: “If cultures allow us to inhabit a meaningful world, an intercultural ethics that fosters dialogical deliberation and symmetric participation might allow us to envision a world in which, as human beings, we are linked (but not trapped) to each other. It will also encourage us to engage in dialogue so that we can listen, learn, and live together as vulnerable, interdependent human beings.”⁶²

Conclusion

This reflection began with the claim that both a universal foundation (the human dignity of all people) and a universal goal (the good for all) establish the framework for doing intercultural theological ethics. It continued by showing that worldviews shape the way in which human beings perceive and search for sense in their lives. The cultures that inform worldviews are not homogeneous, so solving ethical problems within a culture requires similar attitudes to those needed when we search for solutions at a cross-

⁶⁰ On the mutual learning of dialogue partners, he refers to R. Daniel Shaw, “Beyond Contextualization: Toward a Twenty-First Century Model for Enabling Mission,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 34, no. 4 (2010): 212.

⁶¹ Deifelt, “Intercultural Ethics,” 112.

⁶² Deifelt, “Intercultural Ethics,” 118–119.

cultural level. Not only the facticity of plural cultures but also theological belief in God's incarnation and kenotic involvement in the world support the claim that theological ethics should respect different cultural forms of ethical reflection and establish dialogue that seeks the good for all. Such dialogue is a continuous endeavor, a negotiation over time that embraces moral difference with an attitude of humbleness and respect, and a sensitivity toward voices in danger of being neglected.

Intercultural theological ethics, therefore, operates mainly at a more specific level of ethical engagement where practical solutions are envisaged. The impossibility of creating a "pure ethics" helps to explain why even our understanding of the foundational principle and the universal goal of ethics is shaped by our worldview, especially at the practical level. Nevertheless, the universal foundation and goal help to structure and motivate intercultural dialogue within a Christian ethical framework. To approach the "good for all" and to remain aware of the equal dignity of all human beings forms the basis of such a dialogue and finds its place within the current ecclesial emphasis on synodality and global fraternity.



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4. Spiritual Foundation: Contemplative Pragmatics

Peter Sedgwick

I write as an Anglican theologian who has learnt much from Catholic moral theology. In particular, my membership of the Anglican Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) since 2011 has brought me into contact with much Catholic theology. My approach to moral theology is deeply historical and philosophical. Therefore, my contribution to this collection of essays is one that uses a synthesis of Anglican historical theology, moral philosophy, and systematic theology. Only after that does it move to the church today, and it is then, from this historical and dogmatic perspective, that I wish to argue for four intellectual positions on moral discernment, both individual and corporate.

Corporate Moral Discernment as Contemplative, Doxological, Cultural, and Affective

First, Anglican theology has seen cognition not merely as discursive intellectual inquiry but rather as participation in the divine Logos, which has been called contemplation or Reason.¹ This means that one must distinguish between analytic and discursive knowledge, which is the proper domain of science, and the intuitive knowledge proper to life with others, to the appreciation of value and aesthetics, and most fundamentally to a relationship with God.

¹ Edmund Newey, "The Form of Reason: Participation in the Work of Richard Hooker, Benjamin Whichcote, Ralph Cudworth and Jeremy Taylor," *Modern Theology* 18, no. 1 (2002): 4.

Secondly, this theological activity is not only cognitive but also doxological, where knowledge is deeply related to the practice of worship.² In turn, worship is more than an experiential state because, in worship, the movement of God meets the dynamism of the acting person. Moral judgment is equally doxological, and the relationship of moral discernment and liturgical action has been called by Timothy Sedgwick (no relation), who is a lay theologian in The Episcopal Church of the United States (part of the worldwide Anglican Communion), a “sacramental ethic.” The integral, and threefold, relationship between contemplative knowledge, doxology, and ethics means that worship (which also is integrally embedded in its culture) is properly regarded as the transformation of the self that leads into moral action and is therefore one of the fundamentals of intercultural ethics. Such an understanding stands alongside the theological and anthropological foundations of ethics and is always interwoven with an understanding of intercultural ethics. Worship is therefore always the “spiritual foundation” of a “contemplative pragmatics” (the title given to my chapter) in ethical discernment.

Thirdly, Anglican theology has drawn attention to the centrality of culture in our life before God and often has begun its theological inquiry from this premise.³ Language is always embedded in social relations and interactions, and pragmatics is the study of how context contributes to meaning. Pragmatics includes both speech acts, non-verbal communication, and symbols, with a particular understanding of what is communicated both through referential uses of language and performative utterances (with the speaker’s authority for making performative statements being fundamental) and also of what can be communicated in a culture without being explicitly expressed. The divine Spirit or Logos can then be brought to conscious expression through cultural and symbolic actions, often dramatic, that communicate the deepest emotional longings of an individual or community.

² Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge* (Longman and Todd, 1979).

³ Frederick D. Maurice, *The Kingdom of Christ*, 2nd ed. (Rivington, 1842).

Another, and fourth, way of framing this argument is to use the concept of “political affection.”⁴ Affections, or emotions (to use the contemporary description for affections), show that moral judgments are not purely cognitive, and they are also integrally related to a place, person, or event (in this case worship) that create an affective state in the moral agent, whether a community or individual. The lay English Anglican moral theologian Joshua Hordern claims that affections are cognitively directed and intentional, helping us recognize value in an object, since affections are ordered around beliefs and are events that evoke an intellectual judgment, and not simply a non-evaluative emotional response. Affections begin in inter-personal and social communication, last over a long period of time, and for a Christian, establish a foundation between the political, eschatological, and the affectionate. Crucially, affections occur in a single place, such as a community, family, or church, and above all take place in worship.

Hordern defends a principled conservatism, which recognizes the value of tradition, place, and memory in cognition and moral judgment, opposing the theorist Jürgen Habermas on this point.⁵ Affections of praise and hope expressed in worship, especially worship that has a fixed form and is part of an ecclesial tradition, can and do create a moral commitment to action among the individuals participating in it and also embody for the ecclesial community their commitment to moral discernment and action, which spills over into the public realm. They are therefore affections that are personal, social, and political. Hordern writes about the significance of worship in Israel as a community of faith, and says that

The feasts are institutions which prevent the loss of affective, political wisdom. At the feast of tithes, rejoicing is to take place in ways which awaken Israel to moral self-consciousness . . . the festive joy is arranged so as to awaken the people to the neediness of the poor in the light of the

⁴ Joshua Hordern, *Political Affections: Civic Participation and Moral Theology* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁵ Hordern, *Political Affections*, 213.

goodness of the land and the goodness of the One who gave it. Far from being a conclusion, festive joy initiates moral thought and action.⁶

Coleridge as a Theologian Exemplifying these Intellectual Traits

Let me turn for a moment to a historical example of this argument. One of those who developed the argument sketched out above was the philosopher and poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who died in 1834.⁷ In Coleridge's thought, the nature of the intellect is both analytic and discursive, as in scientific inquiry, but also intuitive and contemplative, where imagination gives way to contemplation as the understanding of relationships, value, and the activity of God. Coleridge, however went further and saw such understanding or contemplation as energized by, and expressive of, the divine Spirit in human thought, or what Coleridge called the "Reason." Coleridge was fascinated with ideas. Although a person can contemplate an external object, one cannot contemplate an idea in this same way. Instead, the person must create in their mind (by the process of intuition) the idea which they wish to contemplate as a living subject.

Contemplation for Coleridge is therefore far from the discursive, analytic understanding of intellectual argument or technical skill and is more properly seen as an "inward beholding," a grasping of the spiritual nature of reality.⁸ He cited the Anglican theologian Richard Hooker in this

⁶ Hordern, *Political Affections*, 150–151.

⁷ Peter Cheyne, *Coleridge's Contemplative Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 2020); see chapter 6 on Coleridge in Peter Sedgwick, *The Development of Anglican Moral Theology 1680–1950* (Brill, 2024), 160–188.

⁸ Samuel T. Coleridge, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, vol. 9: *Aids to Reflection*, ed. J. B. Beer (Routledge; Princeton University Press, 1993), 223–224; Douglas Hedley, *Coleridge, Philosophy and Religion: Aids to Reflection and the Mirror of the Spirit* (Cambridge University Press, 2000).

respect as justification of his argument.⁹ Reflection for Coleridge was a discursive, mediating, and analytic function of the understanding, whereas *contemplation* was the fixed, immediate, and intuitive act of the Reason. So when Coleridge refers to *contemplation*, this term is for him synonymous with *Reason*, which in a manner harking back to patristic thought is understood as the human access to the divine Logos, the divine power in creation, or the second person of the Trinity, since Coleridge's thought became increasingly Trinitarian as he refined his argument.¹⁰ Contemplation, or contemplative, in this chapter therefore refers to thought derived from the imagination, which intuitively presences God (or the divine Logos) in both creation and human life, including the public realm. Such a way of knowing is both resourced by worship and feeds back into prayer and corporate liturgy.

Such an argument may seem highly intellectual and elitist. However, Coleridge believed that the culture of each society was created and nourished by individuals who construct symbols that embody the meaning of that culture.¹¹ Creation is open ended, unfinished, and not to be known simply by discursive inquiry, but rather has value given to it by the processes of human interpretation and participation that are continually evolving as “meaning making,” either through the arts (music, drama, painting, and sculpture), through rational argument (theology, philosophy, and aesthetics), or through narrative and literature, which bring into meaning what Coleridge called Ideas—formative, divine powers, which are the divine energy that orders the moral and physical cosmos.¹²

⁹ Coleridge, *The Collected Works*, vol. 9: 292; Richard Hooker's *Of the Lawes of Ecclesiastical Politie*, where Hooker writes of “intuitive beholding.” Richard Hooker, *The Folger Library Edition of the Works of Richard Hooker*, vol. 1, ed. G. Edelen (Belknap Press, 1977), 179.

¹⁰ Coleridge, *The Collected Works*, vol. 9: 169, 174.

¹¹ Samuel T. Coleridge, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, vol. 10: *On the Constitution of the Church and the State*, ed. J. Colmer (Routledge and Kegan Paul; Princeton University Press, 1976).

¹² Luke Bretherton, *Christ and the Common Life* (Eerdmans, 2019), 179.

There is then an irreducibly cultural dimension to all communication, both between individuals and societies, which is why the focus in this collection of essays on “intercultural ethics” constitutes an important contemplative action by individuals or groups, who can discern the possibility of a new way of living. There is thus the option of social innovation by creating a new cultural expression, which may well lead to new insights into God’s activity. Coleridge struck a careful balance between the need to preserve traditional culture and the necessity of change and new development within culture. He used the terms “permanence” and “progression,” and believed that custom could embody reason.

Moral Discernment in Contemporary Anglicanism

In terms of making moral judgments, discernment begins from this theological standpoint by envisioning first in the imagination, and then through contemplation, what it means to live together, and this may provide an awareness both of history (past ways of living together) and the possibility of new forms of social and personal life, or in other words a new cultural expression of human relationships. This is clearly central to the current, polarized debates within the Anglican Communion, both on sexuality and on the possibility of creating a society free of any of the stereotypes that have historically marred our common life (racism, sexism, and much else), while remaining faithful to Christ.¹³ The way of reasoning theologically that I have described is criticized by its opponents for insufficient attention to scripture and the past tradition. However, this theological method will in fact always, and of necessity, turn (after its initial reading of culture and history) to scripture, tradition, philosophy, and past credal affirmations, but the starting points are instead forms of prudential judgments and the exercise of practical reason, which can be

¹³ Abby Day, *Contemporary Issues in the Worldwide Anglican Communion: Powers and Pieties* (Routledge, 2015), chapters 5 and 6.

called *phronesis*.¹⁴ The debates inside Anglicanism in recent decades often turn on the validity (or lack thereof) of this starting point, especially on sexuality.¹⁵ There are many who deny that this is an acceptable way of discerning moral judgments.¹⁶ Nevertheless, Coleridge's influence is found in many nineteenth century theologians (F.D. Maurice would be one) and contemporary theologians (Anglicans such as Dan Hardy and John Milbank, as well as the Reformed theologian Colin Gunton).¹⁷

Luke Bretherton, another lay English Anglican theologian working at the University of Oxford, summarizes this position well. He writes:

Echoing Coleridge, APT [Anglican Political Thought] does not posit a nature/culture binary. Rather, in contrast to natural-law approaches to moral and political theology, it recognizes that a specific cultural-historical form of life is the beginning point and primary focus for political reflection. Thus, for example, Desmond Tutu's homiletic reflections on South Africa are informed by the need to evaluate a particular context within its cultural-historical situation as well as in relation to its conformity to Christ. Instead of focusing on nature, which tends to de-historicize and mystify what is contingent and fallen, APT's focus on culture and history recognizes that contingency, and thence revisability, is a constitutive feature of all forms of life.¹⁸

¹⁴ Jeremy Worthen, "Mapping Communion and Disagreement Ecclesiologically," in *When Churches in Communion Disagree*, ed. R. Heaney, C. Wells and P. Whalon (Living Church Books, 2022), 84.

¹⁵ Mark Vasey-Saunders, *Defusing the Sexuality Debate: The Anglican Evangelical Culture War* (SCM Press, 2023); Charlie Bell, *Queer Holiness: The Gift of LGBTQI People to the Church* (Longman and Todd, 2022).

¹⁶ The many writings of Martin Davie and Ephraim Radner demonstrate this clearly. See, for example, Martin Davie, *With God's Approval? A Theological Exploration of Blessing Same-Sex Couples, in Dialogue with Walter Moberly and Isabelle Hamley* (Dictum Press, 2023) and Ephraim Radner, *The Fate of Communion: The Agony of Anglicanism and the Future of a Global Church* (William B. Eerdmans, 2006).

¹⁷ Philip Aherne, *The Coleridge Legacy: Samuel Taylor Coleridge's Intellectual Legacy in Britain and America 1834–1934* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

¹⁸ Bretherton, *Christ and the Common Life*, 180.

Coleridge's justification for beginning theology with a consideration of social life, past and present, and so with the necessity of culture, is echoed by the Anglican theologian Dan Hardy, who died in 2007, when he writes:

The *Bible* is a vast history of layers of God's engagement with people through the transformation of the meanings and activities of their social life; the *Church* is a complex of people in very different historical situations who find the meaning of their social life and activity by reference to God; *beliefs* testify to God's purposes as found in the social meaning and agencies in events throughout history; and even *certainity* is a social process of finding and enacting truth in the meaning of life, not 'sudden' and 'complete'.¹⁹

This demonstrates that reflecting on intercultural ethics can draw on a long tradition of Anglican thought stemming from Coleridge that is highly influential and engages fully with the cultural reality that is present as one begins to discern what is the appropriate ethical decision to make in a situation.

The Dynamic Creativity of God's Action in Worship as Determinative for Moral Judgment

Worship is formative for human beings because of the creativity found in God's indwelling in Christ and the gift of the Spirit that reorders all of creation, including the self as dynamic, an identifiable source of action in its own right.²⁰ Human beings act for an end, and the ultimate end is the fullest development and exercise of one's active powers. This can be understood as the perfection of one's life, or happiness. Worship is often seen as a highly conventional, undemanding activity in which Christians

¹⁹ Daniel W. Hardy, *Finding the Church* (SCM Press, 2001), 253, italics original.

²⁰ Daniel W. Hardy, "The Foundation of Cognition and Ethics in Worship," in *Worship and Ethics: Lutherans and Anglicans in Dialogue*, ed. by O. Bayer and A. Suggate (Walter de Gruyter, 1996), 131.

continue ancient beliefs and practices, suitably modernized, where much importance is placed on achieving a balance of music, words, and ritual expressions. Liturgical theology does not help this much because it employs textual history to understand why particular rites have developed and how they might be reformed. An alternative approach argues that liturgy shapes human experience and behavior and therefore presents theology as the expression of such experience.²¹ This however sees the critical test for liturgy as bringing about a good experience for the participant. The result of this is seen in many contemporary liturgies where the celebrant occupies a role akin to an entertainer or rock star, adjusting the “worship-experience” to suit the demands of the “audience.”²² This makes worship, in an ironic way, deeply confessional and churchy, ignoring the presence and activity of God in the public realm where ethics delivers its judgments. Equally it is hard to criticize worship if it is experientially satisfying, which suggests varieties of experience and behavior are of equal worth.

Something more must be offered than an undemanding repetition of traditional worship, liturgical scholarship, or an appeal to experience. Instead, theology must seek to understand the movement of God towards persons and to see worship as the response of human beings to that movement in a way that proclaims the presence of God both in the past and present. It also effects a change in human beings as they respond to the energy of God which fulfills all that makes us human. The foundation of ethics and cognition in worship is based on the character of God, such that the energy of God changes and fulfils human relationships according to the nature of God’s own being. It is central to my argument that the person is not an unchanging essence but is a dynamic, active agent. The movement of God towards the acting person means that there are two dynamisms, the

²¹ Hardy, “The Foundation,” 118–120.

²² After the September 2023 conference at which these papers were presented, I attended a student mass with other conference participants at the Votivkirche in Vienna, close to the university department of theology. The mass was well attended by students, but the celebrant performed as if he were leading a rock band.

movement of God and the movement of the human beings whom God created (and still nourishes with God's presence).²³

Dan Hardy takes the quotation from Julian of Norwich "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well," and applies the phrase "well-being" to God's glory, which denotes harmony, being "benign" and "right," and he continues that this is "a feature which is recognized by those who are themselves 'right'."²⁴ Thus, Hardy sees God's nature as "the true character of well-being."²⁵ Hardy argues that God's well-being occurs within relationality, which itself is dynamic, moving from the love that is the true nature of God's character to the fullest expression of that love in relationality. The Trinitarian God practices divine activity as communicative activity with another, where the Spirit stirs the other to the fullness of relationship in an "energy event,"²⁶ and enacts what may be called an "ideal social community"²⁷ as we are drawn into a new "ontological recognition and reorientation"²⁸ through the activity of worship that opens human beings up and energizes them, conferring freedom and responsibility to show how God moves to all humanity, thus partaking in God's glory. Worship is a "bright mystery" that is active and redemptive, as "the stirring of God by the Holy Spirit to be himself by being with humankind in Jesus Christ."²⁹

Again, Hardy plunges back into the importance of culture and ways of living, rather than remaining in a church context.³⁰ The redemption of humanity occurs when the instinctive yearning of human beings for fullness of life is met in worship by each person and is mediated through social and personal life. This is not an abstraction because it is mediated through forms of social life. Faith is a bright mystery and worship has

²³ Hardy, "The Foundation," 131.

²⁴ Hardy, "The Foundation," 137.

²⁵ Hardy, "The Foundation," 141.

²⁶ Hardy, "The Foundation," 145.

²⁷ Hardy, "The Foundation," 146.

²⁸ Hardy, "The Foundation," 147.

²⁹ Hardy, "The Foundation," 135.

³⁰ Hardy, "The Foundation," 139.

ethical content, where humanity is reoriented to well-being, which is akin to glory.³¹

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Catholic theology saw the person as having an immutable essence, with definite laws as to how human nature would and should act, which the magisterium would prescribe for the faithful. This was replaced in the 1960s by a far more responsive understanding of what it means to be a person. As the theologian Josef Fuchs, SJ, wrote in *Personal Responsibility and Christian Morality*, the “dynamic and evolutionary understanding of human existence” had as its task “to shape mankind and the world into an always more ‘human’ world and a more ‘human’ humanity.”³² Fuchs argued that an appeal to moral norms as embodying “objective and universal, eternal divine law”³³ was open to misunderstanding, because although there were of course unchangeable and eternal moral norms, such as the need to act justly, there were also many changeable principles, which were determined by the mutability of a person, their world and their knowledge.³⁴ The danger was that all moral norms were seen as unchanging, since the person was an essence whose nature was fixed and timeless.

Sacramental Ethics

A similar interpretation to Fuchs’s understanding of the person as an agent whose nature was to respond to the challenges of their life is offered by Timothy Sedgwick in his book *Sacramental Ethics: Paschal Identity and the Christian Life*,³⁵ which draws significantly on H. Richard Niebuhr’s *The Responsible Self*.³⁶ Sedgwick does not simply present a view of the

³¹ Hardy, “The Foundation,” 137.

³² Josef Fuchs, *Personal Responsibility and Christian Morality* (Georgetown University Press, 1983), 42; I have kept the original spelling of mankind.

³³ Fuchs, *Personal Responsibility*, 208. He is drawing on *Dignitatis Humanae*, no. 3.

³⁴ Fuchs, *Personal Responsibility*, 208–210.

³⁵ Timothy Sedgwick, *Sacramental Ethics: Paschal Identity and the Christian Life* (Fortress Press, 2008), 11, 34.

³⁶ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self* (Harper and Row, 1963).

person as active and not confined to a fixed essence of human nature but also uses phenomenology, drawing both on anthropologists such as Clifford Geertz and phenomenologists such as Alfred Schutz. What is important is the transition from “being acted upon to accepting and opening oneself [which] results in the formation of a person and his or her world.”³⁷ It is worship which enacts this movement by symbolically expressing the meaning of life, and draws individuals into relationship with God, challenging attitudes, and beliefs that “distance individuals from reality.”³⁸

Sedgwick sees worship as having a paschal identity that enables in turn a paschal way of life. Paschal denotes both suffering and passage—passage from death to acceptance of and reconciliation with our life in this world. The task of Christian ethics is to describe this paschal way of life, which is being a community of love and service.³⁹ The paschal liturgy has the three dimensions of *kerygma* (proclamation), *koinonia* (fellowship or community), and *diakonia* (servanthood), which are all inter-related. “Worship has power only as it celebrates a way of life which for Christians is paschal in character.”⁴⁰ Sedgwick argues that the “giftedness of life is experienced in worship in the celebration of the paschal mystery with its movement from offering in response to God to the sense of grace to the embrace of creation.”⁴¹ What matters is the renewal of worship and the life of the community, which must be held together, for Christian ethical reflection in itself cut off from worship cannot bring about such a renewal. Sedgwick argues that an integration of the broader vision of the Christian life with the values found in relationships, such as the search for mutuality, generativity, and pleasure, is essential to meet the challenges within Anglicanism today. The values must “express and deepen this paschal

³⁷ Sedgwick, *Sacramental Ethics*, 43.

³⁸ Sedgwick, *Sacramental Ethics*, 44.

³⁹ Sedgwick, *Sacramental Ethics*, 46–47.

⁴⁰ Sedgwick, *Sacramental Ethics*, 106–107.

⁴¹ Sedgwick, *Sacramental Ethics*, 65.

movement as they specify how we live out the paschal mystery in the personal relations of daily life.”⁴²

Others have also expressed the centrality of worship to moral discernment. Bretherton writes that a new vision may emerge from “the reception and performance of Scripture in public prayer—in this case the Lord’s Prayer—in relation to a contested political issue.”⁴³ Prayer enacts a reorientation of the self beyond the ties of “kinship, place and polity”⁴⁴ to those in need of political help, such as refugees. “In the Lord’s Prayer, the church as a body hears and performs the world as a place that is open to the transformative love of God and neighbour.”⁴⁵ In this vision, where humility is inculcated and the unity of the church across time and space is demonstrated in the recitation of this devotional activity, prayer is “a preparation for public life.”⁴⁶

Rowan Williams advances a similar argument. In his address in Rome in October 2012 to the Synod of Bishops, the then Archbishop of Canterbury said:

Contemplation is very far from being just one kind of thing that Christians do: it is the key to prayer, liturgy, art and ethics, the key to the essence of a renewed humanity that is capable of seeing the world and other subjects in the world with freedom—freedom from self-oriented, acquisitive habits and the distorted understanding that comes from them. To put it boldly, contemplation is the only ultimate answer to the unreal and insane world that our financial systems and our advertising culture and our chaotic and unexamined emotions encourage us to inhabit. To learn contemplative practice is to learn what we need so as to

⁴² Sedgwick, *Sacramental Ethics*, 74.

⁴³ Luke Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 143.

⁴⁴ Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics*, 144.

⁴⁵ Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics*, 145.

⁴⁶ Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics*, 144.

live truthfully and honestly and lovingly. It is a deeply revolutionary matter.⁴⁷

History and Culture

I have argued that there is a long tradition in Anglican theology of recognizing the importance of culture and equally of the centrality of worship in having an intrinsic relationship to moral discernment. It is time to pull these arguments together. Worship today is increasingly seen by theologians and anthropologists as culturally embedded. Over the twentieth century, sacramental theology developed from a concern with what was canonically valid to a view of liturgy as both deeply embedded in culture and as expressing, sustaining, and challenging the identity of the participants. Cultural awareness and sensitivity became integrally related to theological anthropology, with the cultural history (and often suffering) of the society being present in the liturgy. At the same time the liturgy reflected a belief that active participation of the laity was essential. Within the liturgy, whether sacramental or not, there was the meeting of divine grace and human action, as expressed by Hardy in the section above. Sacramental efficacy was related to the expression of Christian cultural identity in moral life, both for individuals and communities. Moral choices can also become part of worship. As long ago as 1957 the Anglican Communion argued in a report for the Lambeth that the decision about using contraception in a marriage could be made part of the offering of their marriage to the glory of God “a one-flesh unity in a worship which can be not only reasonable . . . but holy as well.”⁴⁸ Here an ethical decision becomes part of worship.

⁴⁷ Rowan Williams, “Archbishop’s Address to the Synod of Bishops in Rome,” October 10, 2014, www.rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/2645/archbishops-address-to-the-synod-of-bishops-in-rome.html.

⁴⁸ “Appendix 1: An Assessment and Theological Consideration of the Facts upon which the report is based,” in *The Family in Contemporary Society: The Report of a Group Convened at the Behest of the Archbishop of Canterbury, with Appended Reports from the USA, Canada, and India* (Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1958), 149.

There are two examples I can give as a demonstration of the integration of worship, culture, and moral discernment. First, I remember a visit of the Anglican Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) to St. Augustine's (Anglican) Church, Umlazi in South Africa in May 2014. Umlazi is a large and very deprived township outside Durban. The intercessions in the Eucharist were by Steve Biko's sister (Steve Biko was a Black activist murdered by the South African government in 1977) and used the language of the Old Testament prophets to denounce the corruption of President Jacob Zuma's administration. Equally notable the music of the Eucharist used Zulu drumming and chanting throughout. The service lasted over three hours, had well over a thousand present, was led by the bishop (himself under house arrest during the apartheid era), and powerfully expressed the longing for freedom of the congregation in the hope of the Christian gospel.

Secondly, in my wife's parish of Ely, Cardiff, which again is a deprived estate in South Wales, there was a powerful example of how liturgy could express the need for reconciliation and forgiveness. In October 2012, a schizophrenic person, who had stopped his medication and believed his wife was being unfaithful to him, drove a van around the estate running people over, thereby killing a mother who flung herself in front of her children to save their lives, while also seriously wounding a dozen more. The Church of the Resurrection held a packed service two days later attended by leaders of the community, where the sermon by the parish priest, Canon Jan Gould, was on the wounds of grief, and how Christ could transform these into healing and forgiveness, as his risen body would always bear the wounds of his crucifixion.⁴⁹ In an interview after the sermon she said, "We're here really to give the community a chance to just come together, to stand shoulder to shoulder in our shock and in our grief,

⁴⁹ As the media reported at the time, Canon Jan Gould "urged those who were crammed into the church on Sunday to respond with love to the tragedy rather than revenge. 'This must surely be perhaps the deepest grief we have shared as a community,' but 'let love be our last word,' Ms Gould said." See "Cardiff Prays for Lorry Victims," *Church Times*, October 26, 2012, www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2012/26-october/news/uk/cardiff-prays-for-lorry-victims.

and just try to encourage one another to support one another.”⁵⁰ Only by forgiving rather than harboring revenge and anger, the community could go forward.

This was worship embodied in a very particular working-class culture, with the specific aim of preventing a desire for revenge against the person who was later convicted of manslaughter for his crime. Worship and forgiveness were related Christologically by reflection on the risen Lord, present both in that gathered congregation (which felt raw with the reality of seeing relatives and friends endure life-changing injuries and in one case a self-sacrificial death) and in the community itself. In this case, the warmth of a close-knit community—renowned for its care for its members and greatly regarded by clergy and congregation for its supportive and cohesive way of life in spite of great deprivation—had to be challenged by the liturgy so that a barely suppressed social passion did not become destructive and seek vengeance.

This is in fact an inversion of the quotation below from Casarella on culture and sacramental worship, where “learning from the popular wisdom in a culture” is necessary but insufficient. The demand of the Gospel for reconciliation recognizes the strength of “popular wisdom” but goes beyond it since cohesion can become the vehicle for revenge at a time of great trauma.

The dialogue of cultures lies at the center of a proper inculturation of the liturgy, and the process of inculturation will thus bring to light the genius of a particular culture as a living, organic member of the Catholic communion of faith. The question arises with respect to the production, translation, and catechetical transmission of any particular liturgical text or event. Inculturation is also part of the process of learning from the popular wisdom in a culture so that the liturgy in that culture reflects

⁵⁰ ITV news, “Hundreds Gather to Mourn Cardiff’s Hit-and-Run Victims,” October 21, 2012, www.itv.com/news/2012-10-21/hundreds-gather-to-mourn-cardiffs-hit-and-run-victims.

that wisdom and guides the people of God to Christ by means of that wisdom.⁵¹

Other liturgies written for this church concerned the large number of suicides during the Covid pandemic and healing after the 2023 riots in the community.⁵²

Two concluding reflections should be made. First, there has been a recognition that liturgy and gender are closely related. Beginning with the work of Mary Collins, liturgy and gender have become a central issue in much feminist and indigenous theology.⁵³ Alison Jasper refers to those women who have “designed liturgies featuring language that spoke about God in relation to the material elements that support life and bodily flourishing, or evoked a Cosmic God whose incarnation is observed in the non-human and planetary, and in our vulnerable world as much as in the historical particularity of Jesus of Nazareth.”⁵⁴ Bridget Nichols makes a related point when addressing the creativity of the Anglican liturgies in New Zealand and Brazil and the impact that women and culture have on the texts. Discussing the Brazilian prayerbook, she writes:

A new approach to language for the Divine can be seen in changes to the collects for Christmas, the Sundays after Christmas, and the Epiphany. Here God is addressed as ‘Maternal Father’, ‘Source of Life’, ‘Loving God’, ‘Marvellous/ Wonderful God’, ‘Light of the nations’. Some new compositions take up urgent social issues—a prayer for courage to

⁵¹ Peter J. Casarella, “Catholic Sacramental Theology in the Twentieth Century,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Sacramental Theology*, ed. H. Boersma and M. Levering (Oxford University Press, 2015), 417–432.

⁵² Peter Sedgwick, “Ely Riots Show Young People’s Need for Hope,” *Church Times*, June 13, 2024, www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2023/2-june/comment/opinion/ely-riots-show-young-people-s-need-for-hope; Max Evans, “Coronavirus: Vicar’s Story of Shock and Grief in Cardiff Parish,” *BBC*, August 16, 2020, www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-53734503.

⁵³ Mary Collins, *Women at Prayer* (Paulist Press, 1987); Kimberly Hope Belcher, “Sacramental and Liturgical Theology 1900–2000,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Catholic Theology*, ed. H. Boersma and M. Levering (Oxford University Press, 2015), 750–766, doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199566273.013.49.

⁵⁴ Alison Jasper, “Exploring Liturgy and Gender,” *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 21, no. 2 (2021): 77, doi.org/10.1080/1474225X.2022.2018244.

struggle on behalf of minorities ('Triumphant justice / who blows upon all the nations'); a prayer for women who suffer violence, abuse and harassment ('God of maternal love, breath of justice'); a prayer for the preservation of the natural world ('Breath of life, who has conceived in your womb all created order').⁵⁵

A second reflection is, however, more cautious. Bruce Morrill notes that contemporary culture makes the practice of liturgy very difficult due to consumerism, a culture of entertainment, and personal-use technology, which means that traditional patterns of rhythm and associated ritual activities are disassociated from the individual and their search for fulfillment. This was recognized by Timothy Sedgwick in the 1980s when he wrote *Sacramental Ethics*, but the culture has become far more atomized since then. Virtual reality and commodified ritual make the practice of liturgy in a face-to-face community a challenge to any church.⁵⁶

Conclusion

This chapter has argued for the centrality of, and interconnection of, worship, moral discernment, and an understanding of reason that is not analytic and instrumental but contemplative and infused with the presence of the Holy Spirit in creation and redemption. I have further argued that there is a long tradition in Anglican theology that exemplifies this. Contemporary examples would be Dan Hardy and Tim Sedgwick on liturgy and ethics; Luke Bretherton on the political nature of worship, drawing on his long engagement in grassroots organizing as well as his academic work; and the writing, addresses, and sermons of Rowan Williams. These are of course Western intellectuals, and this strand of the

⁵⁵ Bridget Nichols, "Gender and Liturgy: Their Conversation within the Anglican Communion," *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 21, no. 2 (2021): 83, doi.org/10.1080/1474225X.2021.1960110.

⁵⁶ Bruce T. Morrill, "Embodiment and Liturgy," in *St. Andrews Encyclopedia of Theology*, ed. B. N. Wolfe (St. Andrews, 2024), www.saet.ac.uk/Christianity/EmbodimentandLiturgy.

Anglican tradition needs to be placed firmly in dialogue with emerging voices, e.g., from Maori culture, Brazil, and South Africa. As a Western historian of Anglican theology, I am aware that this chapter lays far more emphasis on the past tradition rather than contemporary, indigenous examples of where Anglican liturgy and moral discernment are now. However, the theoretical justification of contemplative pragmatism serves as a foundation for the relationship of liturgy and moral discernment in culturally specific contexts, and the two examples given are powerful ones.



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5. Catholicity: A Hermeneutic Model for Intercultural Theological Ethics?

Franz Gmainer-Pranzl

When significant questions bearing on human life and society arise, intercultural theological ethics is regularly exposed to the criticism that it shifts to an “exotic” or relativistic position. It is alleged that intercultural theological ethics trifles in a detached manner with approaches which allude to various cultural backgrounds without subjecting them to critical judgment. Yet, it is the conviction that (cultural) plurality is not to be valued for its own sake but rather enables serious and (self-)critical learning processes, which lie at the heart of the social and intellectual model we call “catholicity.” Indeed, we have here a mode of living and thinking that is distinct, both from a hegemonically uniform way of thinking and equally from the type of relativism which leaves each position and tradition to its own devices. Acknowledging that the “catholicity” proposed here represents an idealized model, one which exists only partially in real-life Catholicism, this chapter suggests that “catholicity” be used as a hermeneutic model of intercultural theological ethics. In support of this thesis, the chapter will (1) clarify the understanding of “interculturality” and (2) examine the concept of “catholicity” in light of the Second Vatican Council, in order to (3) indicate options for a continuing development of theological ethics within the context of the universal church.

“Interculturality”—from the “Sphere Model” to the Multivocal Learning Experience

The term “interculturality [Interkulturalität]” has been in regular use within the German-speaking world since the 1980s, especially in philosophical and theological publications. Journals and societies for

intercultural philosophy¹ have been set up, intercultural theology institutions have been established, and existing journals have been renamed.² Within the philosophical field this project stressed that philosophy does not simply equate to European or North American thought but—as a project involving the whole human race, not just a single language or school of thought—gathers its arguments, terminology, inspirations, and so on from numerous traditions. It was with this in mind that the Viennese philosopher Franz Martin Wimmer formulated his “minimum rule” of intercultural philosophy: “Do not expect a philosophical thesis to be well-founded if its originators stem from just a single cultural tradition.”³ Where theology is concerned, “interculturality” means that in principle the Christian faith can be expressed in, and translated into, any and every cultural or social context: “Intercultural theology deals with the interaction between Christian faith and the cultural-religious pluralism in which it participates.”⁴ Here Volker Küster makes it clear that “interculturality” is not an “exotic” affair, but embodies normal life in a universal church. Intercultural theology originated towards the end of the twentieth century because cultural and religious plurality had become inevitable in European countries,⁵ necessitating appropriate theological reflection.

However, the impression was that the questions and ideas dealt with by intercultural theology have nothing to do with “actual” theology in the main, and “interculturality” was perceived as a term that rather vaguely

¹ *Polylog. Zeitschrift für interkulturelles Philosophieren* (polylog.net), the (German) Gesellschaft für interkulturelle Philosophie GIP (int-gip.de) and the Wiener Gesellschaft für interkulturelle Philosophie WIGIP (wigip.org).

² For example, from issue 34 (2008) onward the “*Zeitschrift für Mission*” was renamed “*Interkulturelle Theologie. Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft*.” At the time this name change was justified as follows: “Intercultural Theology” focuses on the reciprocal effects resulting from the dialogue between theologies from different contexts, and from reflection on different cultural traditions and patterns” (Madeleine Strub-Jaccoud, Dieter Becker and Benedict Schubert, “Ein neuer Name,” *Interkulturelle Theologie. Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft* 34, no. 1 (2008): 4.

³ Franz M. Wimmer, *Interkulturelle Philosophie. Eine Einführung* (WUV, 2004), 51.

⁴ Volker Küster, *Einführung in die Interkulturelle Theologie* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), 15.

⁵ Werner Ustorf, “The Cultural Origins of Intercultural Theology,” in *Intercultural Theology: Approaches and Themes*, ed. M. J. Cartledge and D. Cheetham (SCM Press, 2011), 11–28.

described encounters with “alien cultures” (often including non-Christian religions). “Interculturality” was used to some extent as a blanket term for alterity, foreignness and anything culturally unfamiliar in theology and church, politics and society. Similarly, intercultural theological ethics runs the risk of being regarded as a form of ethics dealing with challenges in “alien contexts” rather than as an attempt to reflect on courses of action, norms, and issues of daily life in light of social and cultural plurality. Accordingly, it is important to arrive at a more precise definition of “interculturality.”

One helpful starting point is provided by Judith Schlehe’s differentiation between multi-, inter-, trans- and hyperculturality. *Multiculturalism* refers to the facticity of cultural plurality, without evaluating it normatively. In any given society, city, or region there are people who belong to different cultural traditions.⁶ Admittedly, the recognition of this plurality tends to bring about a “cementing of collective identities and differences in an unconnected juxtaposition,”⁷ as various critics have pointed out.

Interculturality, by contrast, aims to provide for encounter, exchange, and reciprocal challenge. “The Others” are not simply a social and cultural reality. They have something to say to me, they make me think, and I can learn something from them, which applies the other way round as well. It is a matter of interaction between human beings with different cultural mentalities. One criticism frequently leveled at this concept of interculturality is that it presupposes an essentialist model of “cultures” that interact by colliding with each other like balls. This criticism is rendered invalid by the fact that “interculturality” is not necessarily associated with a concept of fixed cultures, as claimed by Samuel Huntington in his thesis in *The Clash of Civilizations*,⁸ but can work just as comfortably with open and

⁶ This renders the polemic against “multiculturalism,” as expressed by right-wing populist groups, entirely spurious, on the grounds that “multiculturalism,” as a straightforward social given, holds no political position.

⁷ Judith Schlehe, “Kultureller Austausch,” in *Handbuch interkulturelle Kommunikation und Kompetenz. Grundbegriffe—Theorien—Anwendungsfelder*, ed. J. Straub, A. Weidemann and D. Weidemann (Metzler, 2007), 456.

⁸ Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations* (Simon & Schuster, 1996).

differentiated theories of culture. In a nutshell, interculturality should be conceived of as discursive, not identitarian.⁹

While interculturality aims for dialogue and exchange, *transculturality* strives to open up to all participating cultures a common space in which something new can emerge—something which goes beyond the identity of individual cultures. This is the emphasis adopted by migration research, with its focus on the formation of urban life-worlds. As Wolfgang Welsch stresses, “Transculturality penetrates not only the social macro-level, but equally the individual micro-level. In their cultural formation, people are determined increasingly by *several* cultural origins and connections. . . . Contemporary cultural identity is a patchwork identity.”¹⁰

Finally, *hyperculturality* represents the experiences of a digital globalization in which there are no longer any transitions between cultural spaces but simply—according to Judith Schlehe, drawing on the work of Byung-Chul Han—“a global Here.”¹¹ In contrast to transculturality, hyperculturality rejects any remaining significant associations with “culture.” Indeed (and this is not a feature of “hyperculturality”) real globalization is characterized by concrete—perhaps even rigid—economic, political, and material standards.

⁹ See the typology of Andreas Reckwitz, who distinguishes between four concepts of culture: (1) the *normative* concept, which views a particular lifestyle as preeminent and worth striving for; (2) the *holistic* concept, which describes the sum total of a collective (of a “nation”); (3) the *differentiation-theoretical* concept, which calls attention to a subsystem within a society (often in relation to the arts); and (4) the *meaning- and knowledge-oriented* concept, which regards culture as a symbolic order, as a system of meaning and a knowledge order in accordance with which human activity is oriented (*Die Transformation der Kulturtheorien. Zur Entwicklung eines Theorieprogramms*, 2nd ed. [Velbrück Wissenschaft, 2006], 64–90). Hence, if interculturality is perceived in terms of the first or second of Reckwitz’s concepts of culture, then the charge of being a “sphere model” is justified; in terms of the fourth concept, however, we are dealing with an exchange between different symbol systems. What is more, not only are these systems in collision with each other, the challenge they present is a confrontation between systems of meaning and orders of knowledge that are almost entirely alien.

¹⁰ Wolfgang Welsch, “Transkulturalität,” in *Intercultural Discourse: Key and Contested Concepts*, ed. M. Kirloskar-Steinbach, G. Dharampal-Frick and M. Friele (Karl Alber Verlag, 2012), 148.

¹¹ Schlehe, “Kultureller Austausch,” 456.

If we take this differentiation into account, it becomes more apparent that “interculturality” refers not to a clash between clearly demarcated cultural identities in an essentialist or identitarian sense but to a complex learning process involving an exchange between people from different cultural, religious, and/or social backgrounds. Accordingly, “intercultural philosophy” entails not the study of “exotic” philosophies which seem furthermore to be “exclusively territorial” (as if there is such a thing as “*the* Eastern philosophy” or “*the* African philosophy”)¹² but rather an openness and a willingness to expect philosophical debate to offer stimuli, inspiration, and learning opportunities from within each and every tradition. Ethics as a philosophical discipline reflecting on human activity—not purely by documenting how people really act but also by setting out arguments as to why someone should act in a specific way¹³—functions interculturally when its analysis of the arguments surrounding moral actions and judgments draws on different cultural traditions and thereby gains new insights. Ethical approaches from other cultures and societies are not necessarily better or worse, but they can play their part in achieving new perspectives and enhancing one’s own point of view. And last but not least, intercultural theological ethics regards itself as a form of theological ethics which, on the basis of Christian religious practice and critical reasoning, develops an ethical argumentation in dialogue with different ideas, plausibilities, and cultures. If the Christian faith is convinced that the message of the Gospel is a “call to freedom to the whole human race”¹⁴ that it is not merely the imposition of a moral system on humanity but

¹² See the critical observation by Gregor Paul, who maintains, as one of the basic methodological rules of intercultural philosophy, that “terms such as ‘German philosophy’ and ‘East’ and ‘West’ should only be used as mere abbreviations for ‘a philosophy developed and/or formulated in Germany’ or ‘a philosophy developed and/or formulated in Asia (and/or in an Asian language).” Gregor Paul, *Einführung in die Interkulturelle Philosophie* (WBG, 2008), 36.

¹³ This is based on the dual meaning of the Greek *ethos* and the Latin *mos* (from which the German word “moral” and the English words “moral/morality” are derived). This dual meaning denotes both “habit, custom, usage” and “character, virtue”—i.e., not a purely factual “moral principle” but also the *virtue* worth striving for. Annemarie Pieper, *Einführung in die Ethik*, 6th ed. (Francke, 2007), 24–30.

¹⁴ Franz Böckle, *Fundamentalmoral*, 2nd ed. (Kösel-Verlag, 1978), 161.

represents “the fulfilment of humanity’s deepest expectations,”¹⁵ then theological ethics cannot pass up the opportunity to discover fresh lines of reasoning and insights from within different cultural resources. Succinctly, intercultural theological ethics is distinctive for its serious efforts to engage in dialogue with different cultural positions (including those that are alien and perhaps even puzzling) with a view to learning from them and relinquishing Eurocentric perspectives. But what are the possibilities and models available when we seek to practice an intercultural attitude in the context of theological thinking?

Catholicity: the *Character Universalitatis*

The term “catholicity” is normally associated with a specific Christian denomination, particularly the Roman Catholic Church. So if one is “Catholic” that would mean one belongs to a specific church. One is not Orthodox or Protestant, for example. In addition to this *denominational* meaning of “catholic” however, there is a *systematic theological* meaning connected with the original sense of the Greek word. “*Katholou*” is made up of *kat(h)a* (with regard to, in accordance with, etc.) and *holon* (the entirety—retained in the English word “whole”) and it means “with regard to the whole.” This meaning of the ancient Greek word has nothing to do with religion but relates to what is general, “whole,” fundamental.¹⁶ So in the systematic theological sense “catholic” does not mean a specific denomination but refers to the conviction that the Christian message is addressed in principle to all human beings (thus by definition not excluding anyone) and relates to the whole human person, not just to some aspects of human life.¹⁷ In this context, the theologian Yves Congar, who carried out important preliminary work for the Second Vatican Council,

¹⁵ Böckle, *Fundamentalmoral*, 289.

¹⁶ See “καθόλου,” in *Griechisch-deutsches Schul- und Handwörterbuch*, 9th ed. (Hölder-Pichler-Tempsky, 1965), 399.

¹⁷ Yves Congar, “Die Wesenseigenschaften der Kirche,” in *Mysterium Salutis. Grundriss heilsgeschichtlicher Dogmatik, Band IV/1: Das Heilsgeschehen in der Gemeinde* (Benzinger, 1972), 357–594, 485.

spoke of a “qualitative catholicity”¹⁸ of the relation of church life to the fullness of the Gospel. In this sense, every Christian church that relates to the whole Christian faith is “catholic” (bearing in mind that no individual church can manifest the Gospel in all its fullness). Whereas a sect takes seriously only one aspect of the reality of human life, a church which meets the challenge of “catholicity” takes on the whole of life, of the human race and of the world.¹⁹

The following observations focus on the systematic theological meaning of “catholicity,” without losing sight of the denominational sense of the term.²⁰ The Second Vatican Council developed a noteworthy theology of catholicity which remained unrecognized for a long time. Whereas the post-conciliar debate was frequently trapped in a polarization between criticism and defense of denominational Catholicism, in recent years there has been an increase in awareness of the potential concealed in the concept of “catholicity” and of the extent to which “catholicity” as a way of thinking and a social structure can offer a hermeneutic model for communicating the Gospel in today’s world.

In the Preface to the “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World” (*Gaudium et Spes*), there is already a focus on wholeness and universality as the hallmark of catholicity. The church perceives itself as “a community of people” who are the “bearers of a message of salvation for all of humanity” (no. 1).²¹ So, to be catholic in this sense means to proclaim the message of faith, not only in one’s own milieu but to *everyone*, including those whom the church finds it difficult to deal with, whose way

¹⁸ Congar, “Die Wesenseigenschaften der Kirche,” 487.

¹⁹ Congar, “Die Wesenseigenschaften der Kirche,” 491.

²⁰ When considering the denominational meaning of “Catholic” it is also important to recall that (1) this meaning only came into existence at the Reformation in the sixteenth century as Roman Catholicism following the Council of Trent (1545–1563), and that (2) alongside the Roman Catholic Rite there are a number of other rites, including the Greek Catholic, Armenian Catholic and Chaldean Catholic Rites. It is not uniformity, therefore, that is typical of and essential to “Catholicism,” but rather, ritual diversity and cultural plurality.

²¹ Conciliar documents are quoted from Vatican Council II, *The Basic Sixteen Documents: Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations*, ed. A. Flannery (Collegeville, 2014).

of thinking and acting it only partly understands, and whose culture and mentality it finds unfamiliar. But catholicity has not only a *quantitative* but also, as Congar had pointed out, a *qualitative* dimension. It concerns the whole human being. “It is the human person that is to be saved, human society which must be renewed. It is the human person, therefore, which is the key to this discussion, each individual human person in her or his totality, body and soul, heart and conscience, mind and will” (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 3). Faith addresses not just a cognitive or spiritual or emotional dimension but the whole person. So a “catholic” attitude cannot gloss over certain aspects and dimensions of human life but takes seriously the whole human person with all his or her experiences. Purely on the basis of the attitude described in the Preface to *Gaudium et Spes*, it is obvious that the church is there *for all humanity* and is oriented towards the *whole human person*; it is to live out a quantitative and qualitative catholicity.

The specific logic underlying this catholicity is discussed in the “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church” (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 13). This passage of text sounds thoroughly traditional, yet it develops a new and remarkable perspective on human coexistence; the following five points summarize the text of *Lumen Gentium*, no. 13 and explain the new logic underlying catholicity.²²

1. The beginning and end of the chapter set out a commitment to quantitative catholicity—yet not in the sense of a strategy for recruiting as many people as possible into a religious community, but as an attitude of openness towards all people in principle: “All women and men are called to belong to the new people of God.” And at the end there is an even clearer statement: “All are called to this catholic unity of the people of God which prefigures and promotes universal peace.” The point at issue is not that everyone should become a member of the Catholic Church, but rather that to be a Christian Church means opening ourselves up to all

²² All the following citations relate to *Lumen Gentium*, no. 13.

people—just as Christ called people and gathered them together, irrespective of predetermined boundaries.

2. While this message, “The one people of God is accordingly present in all the nations of the earth, and takes its citizens from all nations, for a kingdom which is not earthly in character but heavenly,” sounds somewhat pious and self-evident, its emphasis is quite distinctive. Cultural affiliations are not sacrificed to the church (as if one must demolish one’s cultural traditions in order to become a Christian) but are brought into the church community, since faith can, in principle, be linked with every culture and society. What matters is not a “Christian culture” but the community of the church, to which everyone is called, along with their cultures.²³ So, being catholic does not mean propagating a “Christian culture”; it means being capable of engaging with different cultural traditions and of proclaiming, living out, and interpreting the Christian faith “multi-culturally.”
3. For the church community, the people of God, the source of its life is a gift received “from the Lord himself”: *universality*—in the original Latin, the *universalitatis character*. This gift has an incredible attribute: it empowers the church “to recapitulate the whole of humanity and all its riches under Christ the Head in the unity of his Spirit.” Accordingly, the *universalitatis character* liberates a radically inclusive dynamic. In and through Christ, the whole human race, with all its treasures, is “brought together,” recapitulated. Here, no. 13 quotes the early Christian theologian

²³ There are similar statements in the “Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity” (*Ad Gentes*); see for instance no. 8: “Both Christ and the church which bears witness to him transcend the distinctions of race and nationality, and so cannot be considered strangers to anyone or in any place.” *Ad Gentes*, no. 21, emphasizes that in “witness to Christ” what is at stake is not a culture but “newness of life,” which people experience through baptism and faith: “They must give expression to this newness of life in their own society and culture and in a manner that is in keeping with the traditions of their own land.”

Irenaeus of Lyons, who declared in the second century that through Christ the whole human race would be restored and, in effect, renewed, united, and empowered. So being “catholic” means entering the service of this uniting, empowering, and renewing dynamic of the Gospel.

4. It is particularly exciting to appreciate how no. 13 views the cooperation between different people and traditions within the church as a whole. The relationship between local churches and the universal church is not envisaged—as one might expect—as being directly proportional (“the more universal the church, the less local the church”) but indirectly proportional: “In virtue of this catholicity, each part contributes its own gifts to other parts and to the entire church, so that the whole and each of the parts are strengthened by the common sharing of all things and by the common effort to achieve fullness in unity.” This “catholic proportionality” differs fundamentally from nationalist concepts, which always view the “whole” as a threat to the “particular,” so that the greater the universality, the less the locality—and vice versa—a logic that is currently common worldwide. Not so in no. 13: the more locality, the better it is for universality/catholicity. So, to be “catholic” is not a matter of who imposes universal unity on local regional churches but rather of who views the gifts of local churches as gifts for the universal church and at the same time regards the global level of the universal church as strengthening the local churches.
5. Ultimately, this indirectly proportional relationship between universality and contextuality corresponds to the fifth and final aspect of catholicity as affirmed in no. 13: the conviction “that the people of God is not only an assembly of different peoples, but in itself is made up of various ranks.” Here there is explicit reference to the role of the papal office or Petrine ministry as a global

communicator; what is intended is not the conformity of the local churches but a lively exchange between global unity and local particularity: “There are, legitimately, in the ecclesial communion particular churches which retain their own traditions, without prejudice to the Chair of Peter, which presides over the entire assembly of charity, and protects their legitimate variety while at the same time taking care that these differences do not diminish unity, but rather contribute to it.” It is not appropriate to compare catholicity with an international business group which controls its branches across the world from a central head office. Rather, it is like a network that enables good cooperation by means of global interconnectedness and local variations. It goes without saying that there are tensions and conflicts; the universal church is not a harmonious club. However, it does make a difference whether the “church” as a social system follows a centralistic, identitarian logic, or a “catholic” one which allows unity at a global level and diversity at a local level, leading to mutual strengthening, not conflict.

Lumen Gentium, no. 13 points the way towards a type of “catholicity” that can serve as a hermeneutic model for human life together²⁴ and for intellectual debate on the themes of unity and plurality. So which churches, social systems, or intellectual approaches can be called *catholic*—in the *systematic theological*, not the denominational, sense of the word? Those which

²⁴ See the equally little-known document “*Ecclesia in Europa*” (John Paul II, “Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Europa*. On Jesus Christ Alive in his Church. The Source of Hope for Europe,” June 28, 2003, vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_20030628_ecclesia-in-europa.html), in which Pope John Paul II, in addition to many other noteworthy and bold initiatives (on the issue of migration, for example), proposed the principle “catholicity” as the model for a new Europe: “One and universal, yet present in the multiplicity of the Particular Churches, the Catholic Church can offer a unique contribution to the building up of a Europe open to the world. The Catholic Church in fact provides a model of essential unity in a diversity of cultural expressions, a consciousness of membership in a universal community which is rooted in but not confined to local communities, and a sense of what unites beyond all that divides.”

- are open to the plurality of cultural traditions and the totality of human experience, without losing their awareness of the universal,
- understand the connection between what is human and cultural on the one hand and what is Christian on the other, not as a competitive relationship, but as one that presents a challenge,
- mediate between universality and contextuality in such a way that learning experiences can take place at both levels.

Thus, “catholicity” can serve as a hermeneutic model²⁵ first and foremost where interculturality and globality/contextuality are at issue, such as in the dynamic analysis being undertaken by intercultural theological ethics. A “hermeneutic model” is not a “user manual” and is no guarantee of successful comprehension and translation. However, in contrast both to an identitarian logic (“Everything must be the same”) and to a relativistic attitude (“Why should we care what other people do or think?”), it gives us courage to embark on a learning process. Otherwise, how can the universal church acquire new knowledge and further insights? Not to mention the fact that for the Catholic Church itself the principle of “catholicity” continues to present an ongoing challenge which it can never fully meet; church and theology are constantly called afresh to see the “complete picture.”

²⁵ If hermeneutics means “to put into words (express), expound (explain), and translate (interpret),” then a “hermeneutic model” must set an example for the successful communication of meanings. Gerhard Ebeling, “Hermeneutik,” in *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart. Handwörterbuch für Theologie und Religionswissenschaft*, vol. 3, ed. K. Galling, 3rd ed. (Mohr, 1959), 243.

Intercultural Theological Ethics: On the Path to New Learning Processes in Church and Society

To propose “catholicity” as a hermeneutic model for intercultural theological ethics does not imply that the Catholic Church possesses some kind of epistemological privilege nor yet that the “complete picture” will provide unambiguous solutions to ethical problems. Instead, it is about seeing catholicity as a form of interculturality which enables reciprocal learning processes and regards unity and diversity, globality, and particularity within a religious community as mutually inspiring (not competitive) poles of a circuit. Whatever individual local churches, in their specific cultural and social situations, can contribute from their understanding of theological ethics will be of interest to the church as a whole, since they introduce concrete problems that might be overlooked at a global level. Conversely, the perspective of the universal church can challenge local churches to see their theory and practice of ethical approaches in a wider context. Intercultural theological ethics envisages a global and local communication process of learning and transformation since the situations of other local churches in other societies can have something important to say to its own position. No culture, no local church has a monopoly on the meaning of the Gospel, and no one has privileged access to a theological ethics which then has to be explained to “the Others.” We are all invited to engage with “alien” concepts of theological ethics. It is precisely this which is the essence of intercultural theological ethics.²⁶

It is clear that intercultural theological ethics cannot be reconciled with a Eurocentric perspective on theology and the church, and certainly not

²⁶ See the “Synthetic Model” proposed by the missiologist and theologian Stephen B. Bevans, which has three models: Translation, Anthropology, and Praxis: “The synthetic model reaches out to the resources of other cultures and other theological expressions for both the method and content of its own articulation of faith. In this way a synthesis develops between one’s own cultural point of view and the points of view of others.” Stephan Bennet Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Orbis Books, 1992), 82–83.

with a neocolonial approach which reinforces structures of dependence and power between the Global North and South. But neither does it represent some kind of exoticism which regards an ethical concept as automatically good just because it originates from an alien culture. Disparagement of European theology and ethics is certainly not the point of intercultural theological ethics. Rather, it aims to awaken interest in theological exchange with colleagues from other parts of the universal church. What is required for this is an ability to translate theological arguments appropriate to a specific cultural plausibility into other theological “languages,” as well as the courage not to sidestep conflict. For instance, there is tension between the countries of the Global North and the Global South when it comes to contributions to tackling the climate crisis; environmental ethics are affected by the analysis of the causes and consequences of global warming, which are unequally distributed around the world. Questions surrounding relationship and sexual ethics give rise to even greater conflict, given that Catholic theology in Africa offers answers that differ from Catholic theology in Europe. The issue of homosexuality appears to represent an irreconcilable contradiction within the universal church community of every Christian church; intercultural theological ethics will not be able to find quick solutions with which all theologians within the universal church will agree. But even when it comes to this “hot potato” in the field of theological ethics, we are all invited to reconsider our own convictions in accordance with “catholic” logic and in the light of the greater whole. We are bidden to listen to possible insights from others who hold different points of view. If Christian theology believes that the Spirit of God is at work in all cultures and if theologians in different social contexts are seriously engaged in “reading the signs of the times and interpreting them in the light of the Gospel” (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 4), then tensions and misunderstandings can form part of a laborious learning process, an “intellectual synodality” which can lead to a new, (self-)critical, and more conscientious interaction between church and theology. And intercultural theological ethics could be instrumental along this path.

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6. The Task of Living Together and Learning from Each Other: Catholic Ethics in the Context of Religious-Cultural Diversity

Shaji George Kochuthara

Introduction: Plurality—a Reality of Life

Pluralism is a reality of life today,¹ describing “a situation in which a variety of viewpoints, explanations or perspectives are offered as accounting for the same reality.”² Pluralism extends to various realms—religious, cultural, philosophical, social, ethnic, linguistic, and so on. As Kuncheria Pathil observes, “Today we are aware of the sources of pluralism: the mystery of God, the complexity of reality, infinite possibility and diversity of the human subject, limitations and historicity of human points of view and the differences in the objective world or context.”³ At the same time, “Pluralism does not mean relativism or religious indifferentism or self-sufficiency, as pluralism has to go hand in hand with unity, the centripetal force of this universe.”⁴ Pluralism does not force an “either-or” choice but instead invites a “both-and.”

Beginning with the possibility of a pluralistic approach in Catholic ethics in the context of religious and cultural diversity, I shall refer to the Indian context as an example for our discussion, although the arguments here may be applicable to other contexts of pluralism. We shall particularly

¹ This contribution is a shortened and updated version of “Challenge of Doing Catholic Ethics in a Pluralistic Context,” *Religions* 11, no. 1 (2020): doi.org/10.3390/rel11010017.

² William Henn, “Pluralism,” in *The New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. J. Komonchak, M. Collins, and D. Lane (Gill and Macmillan, 1987), 770.

³ Kuncheria Pathil, “Pluralism, Dialogue and Communion,” in *Revisiting Vatican II: 50 Years of Renewal*, vol. 1, ed. S. G. Kochuthara (Dharmaram Publications, 2014), 326.

⁴ Pathil, “Pluralism, Dialogue and Communion,” 327.

take two issues—ecological ethics and sexuality—to reflect on the need and possibility of doing Catholic ethics in a pluralistic context. Our discussion here is motivated by the question why as Catholics we should and can be open to different sources and approaches in ethics, and how we can work together with others in identifying common grounds for ethics. Although we attempt to draw some conclusions and guiding principles for developing a pluralistic approach to ethics, within the limited scope of this chapter, we do not propose a new theory of pluralistic ethics but rather focus more on the possibility and need of developing such an approach.

The Possibility of a Pluralistic Approach in Ethics

On the one hand, we can say that Christianity from the beginning attempted to inculturate its message, to make the Gospel intelligible to various peoples, imparting it through their languages and conceptual frameworks and dialoguing with their cultures and beliefs, accepting the presence of truth in them. On the other hand, attempts in the opposite direction also can be seen in certain periods of history. For example, during the colonial period many missionaries judged other cultures and religions as the work of the devil and considered Christianity to be the sole source of truth and salvation.

The twentieth century marked a greater awareness on the part of the Church of pluralism, the relative nature of the cultural and conceptual frames in which faith was expressed, and, hence, a greater openness toward other cultures and philosophical traditions. This can be noticed in the Second Vatican Council documents, especially in *Nostra Aetate*, and in the subsequent attitude of the Church towards other cultures and philosophical traditions, making interreligious dialogue and inculturation one of the major themes of theological discussions.

However, hesitations, apprehensions, and precautions surround inculturation, and there has been a strengthening of fundamentalist ideas within the Catholic Church itself. There is resistance towards inculturation not only in the Western Church but also in the Asian and

African Churches. In spite of a variety of opinions, innumerable apprehensions, and lack of clarity on the precise steps to be taken, there is a growing awareness of the need for a more open, sincere, and profound dialogue with different religious and cultural traditions.

Furthermore, in spite of a greater openness to dialogue with various religious and cultural traditions, when it comes to ethics, the scenario looks different. Dialogue in ethics and openness to different ways of approaching ethics or ethical issues have not been very visible in Christian ethics. Christian responses to ethical matters/issues have been rather rigid and monolithic. Uniformity of thinking and practice in ethical matters have been the Christian response, based on the argument that they are clear to all people of good will, that they are proved by revelation and reason. That is, only the Catholic understanding was considered correct, and it was taken for granted. Hence, is pluralism possible in Catholic ethics? Can Catholic ethics accept pluralistic approaches? Can ethical norms different from Catholic norms be considered salvific? Though not much progress has been made in pluralistic ethics, we can appreciate that the Catholic tradition offers various possibilities for developing pluralistic ethical approaches.

Nostra Aetate and Subsequent Documents of the Church

In *Nostra Aetate*, we find a definite change in the Church's approach to other religions. The Council urges Christians to "recognize, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and *moral*, as well as the socio-cultural values found among these men" (no. 2, emphasis added). This openness in dialogue is continued in subsequent documents of the Church, like John Paul II's *Fides et Ratio*. Particularly in no. 72 of this text, the pope also clearly states that what is said about India is true regarding the great traditions of China, Japan, and other Asian countries. Another example comes from the Synod of Bishops for Asia, and particularly its final message at its 1998 Special Assembly: "We esteem the ethical values in the customs and practices found in the teachings of the great philosophers of

Asia, which promote natural virtues and pious devotion to ancestors. We also respect the beliefs and religious practices of indigenous/tribal people, whose reverence for all creation manifests their closeness to the Creator.”⁵ The Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences has focused on triple dialogue, considering the three main Asian realities of life: dialogue with the vibrant religious traditions, ancient cultures, and populations with millions of poor individuals.⁶

Natural Law Tradition

The natural law tradition has been one of the major foundations of Catholic ethics. According to the concept of natural law, human beings can understand moral norms through the use of reason. This points to the God-given capacity that all human beings possess, irrespective of religious affiliation. That is, there is no contradiction between faith and reason, since reason itself is understood as the supreme gift of God. In recent decades, there have been attempts to make use of the concept of natural law to think about common foundations for ethics and to promote interreligious and intercultural communication and consensus on ethical norms and issues. Following a series of interreligious and intercultural discussions on natural law on various continents initiated by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the International Theological Commission published *In Search of a Universal Ethic: A New Look at the Natural Law* (2009), which discusses in detail how the wisdom traditions and religions, though they may vary considerably, testify to the patrimony of moral values. At the very outset, the document shows the need for thinking together about common ethical standards: “Are there objective

⁵ “Message of the Synod of Bishops for Asia (May 13, 1998),” prepared for internet by Msgr. Peter Nguyen Van Tai, *Radio Veritas Asia*, Philippines, vntaiwan.catholic.org.tw/pope/98asia.htm. See also John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia*, chapter 1: “They hold dear the values of respect for life, compassion for all beings, closeness to nature, filial piety towards parents, elders and ancestors, and a highly developed sense of community.”

⁶ *For All the Peoples of Asia, Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences Documents from 1992 to 1996*, vol. 2, ed. F.-J. Eilers (Claretian Publications, 1997), 2.

moral values which can unite human beings and bring them peace and happiness? What are they? How are they discerned? How can they be put into action in the lives of persons and communities? These perennial questions concerning good and evil are today more urgent than ever, insofar as people have become more aware of forming one single world community.”⁷ The document acknowledges that in “diverse cultures, people have progressively elaborated and developed traditions of wisdom in which they express and transmit their vision of the world.” There is “cultural capital” available “in the search for a common wisdom necessary for responding to contemporary ethical challenges.” It is also acknowledged that these traditions reflect divine wisdom.⁸

In Search of a Global Ethic delineates the ethical traditions and contributions of various religions. In the Hindu traditions, the cosmos and human societies are regulated by *dharma*, an order or fundamental law, which one must respect in order not to cause serious imbalances. *Dharma* defines the socio-religious obligations of humans, good and bad actions and their consequences, the importance of disinterested action for the benefit of others, and the importance of non-violence (*ahimsā*). It is also pertinent to note how the text of the International Theological Commission cites a principle equivalent to the golden rule:

I will tell you what is the essence of the greatest good of the human being. The man who practices the religion (*dharma*) of do no harm to anyone without exception (*ahimsā*) acquires the greatest good. This man is the master of the three passions: cupidity, anger and avarice, and renouncing them in relation to all that exists, acquires success. . . . This man who considers all creatures like ‘himself’ and treats them as his own ‘self’, laying down the punishing rod and dominating his anger completely, assures for himself the attainment of happiness. . . . One will not do to another what one considers harmful to oneself. This, in brief, is the rule of virtue. . . . In refusing and in giving, in abundance and in misery, in

⁷ International Catholic Commission, *In Search of a Universal Ethic*, no. 1, vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20090520_legge-naturale_en.html.

⁸ International Catholic Commission, *In Search of a Universal Ethic*, no. 12.

the agreeable and the disagreeable, one will judge all the consequences by considering one's own 'self.'

The text goes on to observe that "several precepts of the Hindu tradition can be placed in parallel with the requirements of the Decalogue."¹⁰

Following this, *In Search of a Universal Ethic* elaborates upon the noble truths in Buddhism and the five precepts and states: "The profound altruism of the Buddhist tradition, which is expressed in a resolute attitude of non-violence, amicable benevolence and compassion, thus agrees with the golden rule."¹¹ Islamic understanding also facilitates seeking common ground for ethics: "The Islamic ethic is, therefore, fundamentally a morality of obedience. To do good is to obey the commandments; to do evil is to disobey them."¹² Here, our main concern is not to describe common teachings of various religions; rather, we shall point out the possibility of developing common ethical standards utilizing the natural law tradition, which has been so important in the Catholic tradition.

Amoris Laetitia, the post-synodal apostolic exhortation on the "Joy of Love" by Pope Francis, highlights an important aspect of the natural law theory of Thomas Aquinas:

I earnestly ask that we always recall a teaching of Saint Thomas Aquinas and learn to incorporate it in our pastoral discernment: "Although there is necessity in the general principles, the more we descend to matters of detail, the more frequently we encounter defects. . . . In matters of action,

⁹ International Catholic Commission, *In Search of a Universal Ethic*, no. 13, referring to *Mahābhārata, Anusasana parva*, 113, 3–9 (ed. Ishwar Chandra Sharma and O.N. Bimali; trans. M. N. Dutt [Parimal Publications, Delhi], vol. 9, 469).

¹⁰ International Theological Commission, *In Search of a Universal Ethic*, no. 13. See footnote 10 in the document: "For example: 'Let him say what is true, let him say what is pleasing, let him declare no disagreeable truth, and let him utter no lie to please someone; such is the eternal law' (*Mānava dharmasāstra*, 4, 138, page 101); 'Let him always consider the action of striking a blow, reviling, and harming the good of one's neighbour, as the three most pernicious things in the string of vices produced by wrath' (*Mānava dharmasāstra*, 7, 51, page 156)."

¹¹ International Theological Commission, *In Search of a Universal Ethic*, no. 14.

¹² International Theological Commission, *In Search of a Universal Ethic*, no. 17.

truth or practical rectitude is not the same for all, as to matters of detail, but only as to the general principles; and where there is the same rectitude in matters of detail, it is not equally known to all. . . . The principle will be found to fail, according as we descend further into detail” (ST I–II, q. 94, a. 4).¹³ It is true that general rules set forth a good which can never be disregarded or neglected, but in their formulation they cannot provide absolutely for all particular situations.¹⁴

In other words, based on the same natural law thinking, different religions and cultures may arrive at different conclusions, which in the light of this quotation are valid. This again underlines the possibility of different approaches and a variety of applications to ethical issues. This does not mean that all conclusions are equally correct. Everyone has the responsibility to reflect on their own conclusions through dialogue and to correct what is needed, and to seek opportunities to work together for a better ethical response.

Declaration of Human Rights

The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) by the United Nations is yet another example of how we can work together for a common ground in a pluralistic context. Though it is not the first time that human rights have been defined,¹⁵ UDHR can be said to be the most comprehensive and most widely accepted document on human rights. It

¹³ Translation by Dominican Fathers of the English Province (Christian Classics, 1947).

¹⁴ Francis, *Amoris Laetitia: On Love In the Family* (March 19, 2016), no. 304, w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia_en.pdf.

¹⁵ Historical sources for bills of rights include the *Magna Carta* (1215), the *English Bill of Rights* (1689), the *French Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen* (1789), and the *Bill of Rights in the United States Constitution* (1791). Early philosophical sources of the idea of human rights include Francisco Suarez (1548–1617), Hugo Grotius (1583–1645), Samuel Pufendorf (1632–1694), John Locke (1632–1704), and Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). Following UDHR, and based on it, there are many human rights documents and treaties such as those of the United Nations, the Council of Europe, the Organization of American States, and the African Union.

is not easy to give a precise definition of human rights. Broadly, we can say that “human rights are those claims that belong to the human person as a human person, based on what he/she is.”¹⁶ That is, all men and women, without any discrimination, have these rights. “Human rights are rights inherent to all human beings, regardless of race, sex, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, or any other status.”¹⁷ Though it may be considered a secular document, lacking any direct reference to religion, scholars have pointed out that religious traditions have contributed to the UDHR.¹⁸ UDHR is an example of what dialogue can achieve in ethical matters in a pluralistic context. It shows that in spite of differences, there is the possibility of working together on ethical issues.¹⁹

Development/Change in Ethical Norms

Various authors have expounded upon the development of moral doctrine. In his 1993 article “Development in Moral Doctrine,” John T. Noonan, Jr. highlights some of the developments in moral doctrine,²⁰ as against the popularly held (mis)conception that moral doctrines never change. Later, in his book, *A Church that Can and Cannot Change: The Development of Catholic Moral Teaching*, he further develops his arguments.²¹ Another important work that discusses in detail the changes

¹⁶ John Kusumalayam, *Human Rights: Individual or/and Group Rights* (St. Pauls, 2008), 43.

¹⁷ *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. www.un.org/en/udhrbook/pdf/udhr_booklet_en_web.pdf.

¹⁸ Drew Christiansen, “Commentary on *Pacem in Terris*,” in *Modern Catholic Social Teaching: Commentaries and Interpretation*, 2nd ed., ed. K. Himes (Georgetown University Press, 2018), 226–252, 244–245; see also Samuel Moyn, *Christian Human Rights* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

¹⁹ The concept of human rights and recognition of the equal rights of all (at least in on some basic matters) are incorporated into the constitutions of various nations. Yet, the concept of human rights may be different in a theocratic nation or a monarchy. Moreover, we cannot say that the concept of human rights is the same everywhere. For example, in some societies, human rights are understood more in terms of the rights of the tribe or community rather than the rights of the individual. Though we do not enter into a detailed discussion on this, it is good to remember that different understandings of human rights continue to exist. This also implies the possibility and need of continuing dialogue on this.

²⁰ John T. Noonan Jr., “Development in Moral Doctrine,” *Theological Studies* 54 (1993): 662–677.

²¹ John T. Noonan Jr., *A Church that Can and Cannot Change: The Development of Catholic Moral Teaching* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2005).

in official Catholic moral teaching is *Change in Official Catholic Moral Teaching*, a collection of essays edited by Charles E. Curran.²²

I would like to point out that at no point in time can we claim an absolutely definite understanding of moral norms, at least on certain issues. This demands that we do not make absolute claims, and that we do not condemn different ethical positions as unethical; instead, we need to critically evaluate our own positions, being open to other positions, with humility and a willingness to learn and change.

Context

Theology, especially theological ethics, is contextual. Ethics develops in constant communication and dialogue with its context. The complexity of the context of ethics is not only shaped by different questions, different sources, and different approaches but also by different answers.²³ Rather than claiming exclusivity or superiority, what is needed in ethical discourse is creative communication and self-critical dialogue among the different approaches in theological ethics. This is one of the tasks that moral theologians need to take up in the future with renewed enthusiasm and openness. Here, the dialectical relationship between culture and morality, the growing awareness and acceptance of religious pluralism as a given context that will continue to exist, and the dialectics between local and global concerns get more attention.²⁴

²² Charles Curran, ed., *Change in Official Catholic Moral Teaching* (Paulist Press, 2003).

²³ Shaji G. Kochuthara, "Context and the Future of Theological Ethics: The Task of Building Bridges," in *Catholic Theological Ethics: Past, Present, and Future: The Trento Conference*, ed. J. Keenan (Orbis Books, 2011), 296–306.

²⁴ James F. Keenan, *Towards a Global Vision of Catholic Moral Theology: Reflections on the Twentieth Century* (Dharmaram Publications, 2007), 101–145.

Culture and Inculturation in Ethics

As Gerald O'Collins remarks, "Culture concerns the totality of life."²⁵ Culture is a living reality undergoing a continuous process of change. It is pertinent to see what *In Search of a Universal Ethic* says about culture and the role of culture in ethics: "Oriented by the persons who surround him permeated by the culture in which he [sic] is immersed, the person recognizes certain ways of behaving and of thinking as values to pursue, laws to observe, examples to imitate, visions of the world to accept. The social and cultural context thus exercises a decisive role in the education in moral values" (no. 38). The importance of culture, the need for respecting its uniqueness, and its role in theologizing have been increasingly recognized in recent decades. However, often, the role of culture in ethics or ethical formation has not received much attention since ethical values and norms have been considered universally valid. Considered against such a background, what Pope Francis writes in *Amoris Laetitia* deserves our attention. The Pope writes that though unity of teaching and practice is necessary in the Church, this does not preclude various ways of interpreting some aspects of that teaching or drawing certain conclusions from it. "Each country or region, moreover, can seek solutions better suited to its culture and sensitive to its traditions and local needs. For 'cultures are in fact quite diverse and every general principle . . . needs to be inculturated, if it is to be respected and applied'" (no. 3).²⁶ Evidently, it is a general principle, and the Pope does not give specific norms as to how this process of inculturation is to be undertaken. For example, there are elements that are positive, and that can be inculturated without any difficulty, but there can be also elements that cannot be easily accepted or that have to be rejected. However, though it is only a general principle, it

²⁵ Gerald O'Collins, *Rethinking Fundamental Theology* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 339.

²⁶ Including reference, among others, to "Concluding Address of the Fourteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (24 October 2015)," *L'Osservatore Romano*, October 26–27, 2015, 13.

is highly commendable, as it is an affirmation of the value in other cultures and of the possibility of dialogue on ethical issues.

Initiatives for Doing Catholic Ethics in a Pluralistic Context

In the recent decades, as Michael Amaladoss writes, there is a deeper conviction that “all religions can facilitate salvific divine-human encounter, so that people belonging to other religions are saved, not merely in spite of, but because of practicing those religions.”²⁷ For this reason, Pathil observes that “the only practical option before us is a third alternative: dialogue, positive relationship, collaboration and common pilgrimage and search for truth in view of the welfare, salvation and unity of the whole humanity.”²⁸ Thus, there has been a renewed interest in dialogue with religions and cultures, and various initiatives were taken for dialogue in ethics and for doing ethics in a pluralistic context. Religions should thus be active participants in the development of ethics in a pluralistic context. One noteworthy contribution is that of Hans Küng, who has written extensively on a global ethics.²⁹ He has highlighted some of the areas of consensus and common interest: human wellbeing, maxims of basic humanity, a reasonable middle way, the golden rule, the horizon for meaning and identification of a goal, concept of virtues and vices, etc.³⁰

Though not at an extensive level, there have been many initiatives in recent years to dialogue with the ethics of other cultures and religions. *In Search of a Universal Ethic* outlines several areas of convergence in ethics and collaboration. In his books and articles, Yiu Sing Lúcas Chan has

²⁷ Michael Amaladoss, “The FABC Theology of Religions,” in *Harvesting from the Asian Soil: Towards an Asian Theology*, ed. V. Tirimanna (Asian Trading Corporation, 2011), 53–66; 53.

²⁸ Pathil, “Pluralism, Dialogue and Communion,” 329.

²⁹ Hans Küng, Josef van Ess, Heinrich von Stietencron, and Heinz Bechert, *Christianity and World Religions: Paths to Dialogue* (Orbis Books, 1986); Hans Küng, *Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethic* (Continuum, 1996); Hans Küng, *A Global Ethic for Global Politics and Economics* (SCM Press, 1997); Hans Küng, *A Global Ethic for Global Politics and Economics* (Oxford University Press, 1998).

³⁰ Küng, *Global Responsibility*, 55–64.

elaborated upon building bridges between Christian and Confucian ethics based on the concept of virtue in both religions.³¹ Osamu Takeuchi has brought out the relationship between the Japanese concept of *Wa* and Christian ethics.³² In its various conferences and publications, Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church has devoted special attention to ethics in a pluralistic context.³³

Understanding Catholic and Hindu Approaches to Ecology and Sexuality

In what follows I attempt to briefly present two areas of ethical interest as examples of possible dialogue and communication—ecology and sexuality. With regard to ecology the possibility of convergence is greater, whereas regarding sexuality, the differences may be more conspicuous.

Ecotheological Ethics

At least from the time of the publication of Lynn White's "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,"³⁴ Christianity has been accused of bearing responsibility for the ecological crisis. Environmental activists and philosophers allege that Christianity, assigning to humans the role of

³¹ Yiu S. L. Chan, "Bridging Christian Ethics and Confucianism through Virtue," *Chinese Cross Currents* 5 (2008): 74–85; "As West Meets East: Reading Zunzi's 'A Discussion of Rites,'" in '*Ahme nach was du vollziehst.*' *Positionsbestimmungen zum Verhältnis von Liturgie und Ethik*, ed. M. Stuflesser and S. Winter (Friedrich Pustet KG, 2009), 101–120; Yiu S. L. Chan, "Bridging Christian and Confucian Ethics: Is the Bridge Adequately Catholic and Asian?," *Asian Christian Review* 5 (2011): 49–73; Yiu S. L. Chan, "Catholic Theological Ethics: Some Reflections on the Asian Scenario," in *Moral Theology in India Today*, ed. S. G. Kochuthara (Dharmaram Publications, 2013), 101–121; Yiu S. L. Chan, *The Ten Commandments and Beatitudes: Biblical Studies and Ethics for Real Life* (Dharmaram Publications, 2015) [First published by Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2012].

³² Osamu Takeuchi, "The Heart of *Wa* and Christian Ethics," *Asian Horizons* 4 (2010): 114–127.

³³ Yiu S. L. Chan, James Keenan, and Shaji George Kochuthara, eds., *Doing Asian Theological Ethics in a Cross-Cultural and an Interreligious Context* (Dharmaram Publications, 2016).

³⁴ Lynn White Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155 (1967): 1203–1207.

“subduing the earth” and “dominating” it, promoted unbridled exploitation of nature, leading to the present crisis. Any attempt to consider nature as sacred would be labeled as pantheism and idolatry. Based mainly on the interpretations given to the creation narratives, the Christian tradition developed an anthropocentric perspective, which considered the natural world “a resource for human utility and not as a functioning community of mutually supporting life-systems within which the human must discover its proper role.”³⁵ In this worldview, nature has only secondary importance.³⁶ Creation, redemption, incarnation, resurrection, and parousia were interpreted in an anthropocentric way, though other perspectives also are present in the Bible. However, the Christian theology of ecology has drastically changed in recent decades. Creation stories and other biblical passages are (re)interpreted in such a way that a more important place is given to the ecosystem, the earth, and nature as a whole. The encyclical letter of Pope Francis *Laudato Si'* reflects this renewed understanding and the urgency of the issue.

Hinduism has been a strong proponent of the sacredness of the earth and everything created. One of the fundamental cosmological insights of the Indian tradition regarding this world is that it is indwelt by the Lord of the Universe and hence it is sacred.

“*Isavasyam idam sarvam yatkinṇa jagatyam jagat.*” (“This revolving world together with every minute particle in it is indwelt by the Lord”) (*Iśa Upaniṣad*, 1). As Nanditha Krishna, a noted Hindu expert on ecotheology in Hinduism, comments, “Hinduism believes that the earth and all life forms—human, animal and plant—are a part of Divinity. Man [sic] evolved out of these life forms and is a part of the creative process, neither separate nor superior.” She further underscores that we should change our

³⁵ John B. Chethimattam, “Ecology and Environment in Catholic Perspective,” *Kristu Jyoti* 7 (1991): 54.

³⁶ Mary E. Tucker and John Grim, “Series Foreword,” in *Jainism and Ecology: Nonviolence in the Web of Life*, ed. C. Key Chapple (Harvard University Press, 2002), xxi.

lifestyle and habits to simplify our material desires, without taking more than a reasonable share of resources.³⁷

The same insight can be seen in the *Bhagavad Gita*: “*Sarvasya çāham hṛdi sanniviṣṭi*.” (“And I have inserted myself into the heart of everything”) (15:15). This is a basic Hindu conviction, and hence nature is venerated by Hindus because they believe that “nature is a manifestation of the divine.”³⁸

The Hindu vision affirms the sacredness not only of the human being but everything in nature. The Hindu tradition reveres all life—human, non-human, plant, and animal. When humans imbibe this vision, they become servants of the Divine and all their actions, including those for the protection of the world around them and all the beings therein, become acts of worship.³⁹

In the Hindu tradition, there is an underlying unity of all life, the world, and all that exists. The interconnectedness of all life and all creatures is affirmed by the scriptures.⁴⁰ Animals, in the Vedic vision, are not inferior creatures, but manifestations of gods on the lower scale of evolution compared to human beings. Animals like monkeys, elephants, tigers, cows, bulls, etc., occupy important places in the spectrum of gods. “Spiritually, there is no distinction between human beings and other forms of life. All forms, including plants and animals, are manifestations of god as limited beings (*jivas*). Even microorganisms are *jivas*, having souls of their own.”⁴¹ The protection and worship of the cow symbolizes human responsibility to the sub-human world and also stresses reverence for all forms of life.

This attitude of reverence and gratitude toward the earth and the whole cosmos in Hinduism shows us the possibility of working together to face the ecological crisis and to respond together to the spiritual inadequacy

³⁷ Nanditha Krishna, *Hinduism and Nature* (Penguin Books, 2017), 223.

³⁸ Krishna, *Hinduism and Nature*, 11.

³⁹ Krishna, *Hinduism and Nature*, 222.

⁴⁰ Swasti Bhattacharya, *Magical Progeny, Modern Technology: A Hindu Bioethics of Assisted Reproductive Technology* (State University of New York Press, 2006), 65.

⁴¹ Joby Cherian, “Vedic Ethos and Environmental Concerns,” *Journal of Dharma* 33 (2008): 191.

that many feel in the face of this crisis. There are differences in the basic faith visions and convictions but a more critical re-evaluation of interpreting the Hindu approach to nature as pantheistic and naturalistic will help us better understand the richness of these traditions and find common grounds to work together. Many have said the same regarding African religions, which have a reverential approach to nature. Besides convincing us of the possibility of working together, this will also help us rediscover our own eco-theology and eco-ethics, reconsider the interpretations in the past, and correct the imbalances in one's own approach.

The concepts of nature and the approaches of the two traditions may look different. However, we can also notice areas of convergence. Ecological ethics is an area where people belonging to different religions and cultures have begun to work together. There are publications in which scholars from various religions, including Christianity and Hinduism, have contributed. Some theological journals have also taken up the theme of ecotheology with contributions from Hindu and Christian scholars. Recently, an inter-Asian workshop on the "Spirituality and Theology of Creation," under the leadership of Missio Aachen, was conducted at Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram, Bangalore, India, in 2019. This workshop was an attempt to look at the ecological issue from an intercultural, interreligious, and comparative perspective to promote interreligious and intercultural dialogue on creation theology and environmental ethics. Scholars from Hinduism and Christianity presented papers, which have been published.⁴² These scholars identify great possibilities for working together on ecological issues and for developing an ecological ethics

⁴² The workshop brought together scholars from five religious traditions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and Indigenous religions. For the papers, see Isis Ibrahim, Shaji George Kochuthara, and Klaus Vellguth, eds., *In der Schöpfung Heimat finden: Asiatische Schöpfungsspiritualitäten im Dialog* (Grünwald, 2020). The English version of this book also has been published, see Isis Ibrahim, Shaji George Kochuthara, and Klaus Vellguth, eds., *Finding a Home in Creation: Asian Spiritualities of Creation in Dialogue* (Dharmaram Publications, 2022). See also Isis Ibrahim, "Christianity—A Universal Resource among Others? Creation Faith in an Intercultural and Interreligious Perspective," *Asian Horizons* 15, no. 2 (2021): 257–269; Klaus Vellguth, "Spirituality and Theology of Creation," *Asian Horizons* 15, no. 2 (2021): 270–285.

together. However, not much has been achieved so far to concretize this possibility. The rise of fundamentalist ideas, promoted by political parties and other groups, may be one of the main factors behind the reluctance to collaborate on such issues.

Sexuality

Christianity understands sexuality as good, willed by God, and as integral to God's creative design. Based on scripture, tradition, and theological developments, sexuality is understood to have basically three meanings or aspects: love, procreation, and pleasure. Although these three are considered the basic aspects of sexuality, the understanding of the interrelationship among them has changed over time. For example, Augustine considered procreation as the primary good of sexual relationships; for Aquinas, procreation was likewise the primary end. From the time of Vatican II, the Catholic Church holds that procreation and love are the two inseparable purposes of marriage/marital sexuality. A theology of sexual pleasure is still in the development phase.

The situation is different in India, as Geoffrey Parrinder observes: "Nowhere have close relationships of religion and sex been displayed more clearly than in India and, with divine and human models of sexual activity, sacramental views of sex were abundantly illustrated."⁴³ The Hindu conception of a full life consists in the harmony of *Dharma* (righteousness), *Artha* (wealth), and *Kāma* (sexuality/sexual desire). Although *Dharma* has primacy, it is equally emphasized that neither *Artha* nor *Kāma* is to be neglected.⁴⁴ Different approaches to sexuality can be identified in the

⁴³ Geoffrey Parrinder, *Sex in the World's Religions* (Oxford University Press, 1980), 5.

⁴⁴ *Mahabharata*, 12.167; See also Parrinder, *Sex in the World's Religions*, 14. It should be noted that *kāma* is more seen as a precondition for all the other *puruṣārthas*: "Unless an individual has a desire to attain *artha*, to follow *dharma*, or to attain *mokṣa*, he cannot have *artha*, *dharma*, or *mokṣa*." Rajendra Prasad, *A Conceptual-Analytic Study of Classical Indian Philosophy of Morals History of Science*, Part 1, *Philosophy and Culture in Indian Civilization*, 12 (Concept Publishing Company, 2008), 250.

Indian religious tradition. The next four sections attempt to broadly classify these different approaches.⁴⁵

The Mythical and Ritualistic Concept of Sexuality

In this approach, sexuality is considered godly. This is especially depicted in the creation stories, where the work of creation is presented as the result of the sexual desire and sexual act of god/gods. For example, *Bṛihadaranyaka Upaniṣad* narrates stories of creation that result from the sexual intercourse of Prajapati (*Bṛihadaranyaka Upaniṣad*, 1.4). *Bṛihadaranyaka Upaniṣad* describes sexual intercourse as a ceremony. The woman is considered the consecrated place where sacrifice is to be performed (*Bṛihadaranyaka Upaniṣad*, 6.4). Moreover, the godheads are always represented with their female consorts.⁴⁶ This is in general the basis of fertility cults and rites. Here, the procreative dimension of sexuality is emphasized, although the recreational dimension also is not lacking.

The Mystical Concept of Sexuality

On this model, the relationship and union between God and the human being/soul are symbolically presented in sensual and erotic language. The longing of the soul/human for God is described with vivid and explicit imagery that highlights the sexual love and union of the devotee with the deity. Usually, the devotee is the female, and the deity is the male. The *Kṛṣṇaleela*, especially the love-play of Kṛṣṇa and Radha, in the *Bhagavata*

⁴⁵ We have to remember, however, that we cannot make a watertight division between different approaches. The origin and foundation of different approaches can be seen in the same *purāṇas* and in the stories of the same gods and goddesses. Similarly, elements of different approaches can be found in the same approach. I have attempted this classification by taking into consideration their major emphasis.

⁴⁶ See "Vatsyayana," in Subodh Kapoor, *Encyclopaedia of Indian Heritage*, vol. 45 (Cosmo Publications, 2002), 3.

Purana is the best example of this.⁴⁷ Sexuality here is the symbol of the highest union and intimacy that is possible between the *bhakta* and the deity.

The Tantric Concept of Sexuality

In the tantric system, in which mainly the Mother Goddess is worshipped, sexuality occupies a central role. *Tantra*, instead of a withdrawal, encourages the fullest acceptance of human desires and feelings, since they are the *via media* between the physical world and the inner reality. The world and the body are means of attaining spiritual realization. The body is not the enemy of the soul; matter and spirit are not two opposing forces fighting each other. The body alone is the means through which the human can come to spiritual fulfilment. Spiritual powers are hidden in the body itself. Sex is a means of awakening the *kundalini*, of joining the female and male principles in the body, through which alone the spiritual powers of the body will be ultimately released and realized. Hence, sexual union becomes a ritual for spiritual realization.

Kāmasāstra

This is the science of love and sex. This can be said to be the Indian sexology. *Kāmasāstra* is concerned merely to teach the means and manner through which humans may best enjoy *kāma*.⁴⁸ *Kāma*, although often understood as sexual pleasure, “denotes the whole range of possible experience within the sphere of love, sex, sensual gratification and delight. *Kāma* is wish, desire, carnal gratification, lust, love, and affection.”⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Among love poetry based on the love of Kṛṣṇa and Radha, as the poem *Gita Govinda*, the works of Chandi Das, of Chaitanya (sixteenth century), of the Ālvārs, etc. are among the most popular. Chaitanya used to dress himself as Kṛṣṇa and Radha.

⁴⁸ Kapoor, *Vatsyayana*, 35.

⁴⁹ Heinrich Zimmer, *Philosophies of India*, ed. J. Campbell (Motilal Banarsidass, 1990 [reprint 2005]), 145.

Kāmasūtra by Vatsyayana is the most well-known work of *Kāmaśāstras*. *Kāmaśāstras* deal with sex and the man—woman relationship. Their chief concern is to help the human being attain pleasure. They also speak about family and the importance of progeny, but what they underscore is the man—woman relationship and the attainment of pleasure in this union.

These different approaches to sexuality existed side by side in Hinduism, with some traditions or sects giving more importance to a particular approach or adopting only one. However, there was no attempt from a particular sect or tradition to condemn other approaches to sexuality. Different approaches were accepted as equally valid and as having their own value.

Comparing both the Catholic and Hindu concepts of sexuality, we can identify that the basic meanings are the same; namely, love, procreation, and pleasure. However, the way they are understood and practiced, and the understanding of the interrelationship among them, is different. This does not mean that there is no possibility of dialogue or convergence. For example, especially for a better understanding of the positive value of sexual pleasure, Catholic theology can be helped by the Hindu approach to sexual pleasure. However, such initiatives need more profound dialogue. Moreover, it is also important to situate the values in sexual morality in the overall vision of values in human life.

Concluding Remarks and a few Basic Considerations

1. Doing ethics in a pluralistic world is not about constructing new ethical systems, principles, or norms; that is, it is not about inventing a new ethic that will become a mere addition to different, already-existing ethical systems. Doing ethics in a pluralistic world is about understanding the ethics and approaches of each other, believing in the sincerity of each religion and culture in seeking the good, appreciating them, understanding and strengthening areas of agreement, understanding the differences, and reflecting together on the differences without being judgmental.

2. Doing ethics in a pluralistic context is not succumbing to “relativism.” It does not mean taking a position that there is no universally valid ethical norm or that any norm can be changed at any time. It is about understanding and appreciating the basic values behind the norms and understanding those values, even when their expressions in a particular context are different.
3. There can be areas on which agreement can be rather easy, whereas agreement on certain areas and issues may be difficult, which may demand more dialogue and critical evaluation together. What is important is that we are able to collaborate. If we wait until perfect consensus is arrived at before working together, we may never be able to collaborate. Instead, if we begin to collaborate on issues on which we agree, we may be able to understand each other better. However, in that process, we may learn to dialogue better even in areas of disagreement.
4. Attempts to develop a pluralistic ethics are founded on a basic trust in the goodness and good will of all: all seek human wellbeing, all seek to do good, and all seek to avoid evil (ST I-II, q. 94).⁵⁰ However, the concept of what is good and what is evil, especially on concrete issues, may differ. This difference also depends on differences in anthropological vision, world vision, and theological vision. This calls for an ongoing dialogue with each other, not for mutual condemnation and conflict. Uniformity cannot be set as the goal; relativism also cannot be a solution. Instead, a search together for what is more humanizing for human beings individually and collectively can be undertaken.

⁵⁰ This is the fundamental principle of natural law according to Thomas Aquinas.

5. Doing ethics in a pluralistic context demands serious study, research, and an examination of the scriptures, traditions, and works by recognized scholars of each religion.
6. Each religion and culture may have various traditions and various opinions on a particular concept or ethical issue, sometimes conflicting and contradictory. There may be ethical norms that are not conducive to the wellbeing of the person and society, and these would need to be corrected. However, attempts to correct or change an ethical perspective, if they are needed at all, should focus first of all on inviting attention to internal differences or conflicts, which will help all parties better perceive the real value and ethical norm at stake. If this is not a possibility, a critical evaluation of the proper perspective in light of the views of others may be pursued, but without claiming any superiority.
7. Humility is one of the most fundamental virtues in dialogue. No one possesses the full truth and understands it perfectly. God is beyond the full comprehension of anyone, Catholic, Hindu, or otherwise. We can help others in understanding and experiencing God better, and others can help us with the same. We are seekers on the same path, seekers seeking together, learning from each other, helping each other to understand and experience the fullness of truth. This basic humility gives us the possibility to realize our own limitations and incompleteness and to understand the richness of others.
8. Plurality is a fact of life, and it is going to remain so. What matters is our approach to plurality, how we live together, enriching each other and being enriched by others. Human existence is basically co-existence. We need to face together the ethical challenges of today: violence, intolerance, injustice, poverty, the suffering of the innocent, the ecological crisis, terrorism, the crisis of democracy

and political leadership, etc. Any ethical issue anywhere in the world is or should be felt as an issue in any other part of a globalized world, since humanity is interconnected, and since it must be approached as an issue about the basic dignity of the human person. What we need is a concerted effort to solve it in solidarity with others, in the spirit of dialogue, in humility and openness to others, and openness to the Spirit, who is active in everyone, in every religion and culture.

9. Having said all this, we cannot claim that a clear theoretical framework is already there for a pluralistic ethics. For that, scholars from various traditions have to come together in dialogue. Only through such a dialogue can a framework for a pluralistic ethics be developed.



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7. Ensuring Equality and Objectivity in Intercultural Dialogue

Agnes M. Brazal

While there is growing recognition of the need for intercultural ethics, there remains a lack of comprehensive studies addressing methods of navigating ethical questions within a globalized and multicultural world. This chapter, in particular, aims to address the question: Considering the heterogeneity and unequal power relations between and within cultures and how moral perspectives are shaped by contextual-cultural values, how does one ensure equality and objectivity in intercultural conversations aimed at generating moral knowledge? I propose that intercultural dialogue on ethics geared toward the production of moral knowledge must be guided by certain criteria for transformative criticism that would ensure equality and objectivity. The first section establishes a framework for intercultural conversation within a discourse-centered understanding of culture as well as a constructive realist view of intercultural ethics. Constructive realism affirms the existence of an objective reality while emphasizing that we interpret and derive norms from this reality based on our conceptualizations. This framework necessitates transformative criticism of various readings/norms in intercultural conversation. Transformative criticism refers not only to the conduct of intersubjective criticism among equals but also to the transformation of results in response to the criticisms. The second section then briefly discusses the three criteria for transformative criticism identified by US-American Helen Longino, a philosopher of science, and then focuses on her fourth condition, the equality of intellectual authority criterion, as shaped by the thoughts of German critical philosopher Jürgen Habermas. The four criteria, however, are not sufficient to ensure equality and objectivity. The third section discusses a fifth criterion that I added, that is, the granting of

epistemological privilege to marginalized groups. The last section elaborates on how these criteria can be appropriated in Christian intercultural dialogue toward the production of moral knowledge.

A Framework for Intercultural Dialogue

Any discussion of interculturality or intercultural conversation must first clarify its underlying concept of culture and explain how objective reality is understood as the basis from which norms are derived.

A Discourse-Centered Approach to Culture

For Edward Twitchell Hall, regarded by many as the founder of the intercultural communications approach in the 1950s, all cultures are unique, homogenous, and relatively stable.¹ Intercultural communication creates a space for dialogue and understanding among diverse cultures that have, by and large, remained unchanged. This notion of interculturality, embraced by numerous intercultural communication scholars, appears to suggest the equality of all those engaged in the conversation. It overlooks the influence of power dynamics in cultural discussions (for instance, who determines and defines the ethnic/religious group's culture? Who holds authority as its gatekeepers?) and the phenomenon of cultural hybridization, particularly evident with globalization and massive migration.

Some of the later interculturalists have adopted a more discourse-centered approach to culture.² A discourse, according to Michel Foucault, encompasses a collection of statements that furnish a framework for discussing a subject within a specific historical context. Discourse dictates what topics can be addressed and excludes certain modes of expression or

¹ Edward T. Hall, *Beyond Culture* (Anchor Books, 1976).

² Joel Sherzer, "A Discourse-Centered Approach to Language and Culture," *American Anthropologist* 89, no. 2 (1987): 295–309, doi.org/10.1525/aa.1987.89.2.02a00010; Srikant Sarangi, "Intercultural or Not: Beyond Celebration of Cultural Differences in Miscommunication Analysis," *Pragmatica* 4, no. 3 (1994): 409–427, doi.org/10.1075/prag.4.3.05sar.

knowledge construction regarding the subject.³ A discourse-centered perspective perceives cultures as more fluid and evolving, heterogeneous, and constructed in a field of power relations.

Unlike many intercultural communication theorists, intercultural philosophers from the German-speaking parts of Europe view cultures as developing in the process of exchange with other cultures.⁴ Emerging in the 1980s, this type of intercultural philosophy is an attempt to overcome Eurocentrism, which remains a dominant paradigm. Raúl Fornet Betancourt, a proponent of intercultural philosophy, regards intercultural dialogue as an alternative model to the homogenizing trend in neo-liberal globalization.⁵ In this perspective, dialogue can be transformative of cultures and in each other's positions.

A Constructive Realist/Contextual Empiricist Approach to Intercultural Ethics

Constructive realism is a meta-ethical model of intercultural ethics that acknowledges that an independent reality exists, but human beings read this reality, conceptualizing it, making sense of it, and basing norms on it.⁶

³ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. Alan M. Sheridan Smith (Routledge, 1972).

⁴ See for instance Raúl Fornet Betancourt, "Philosophical Presuppositions of Intercultural Dialogue," *Polylog: Forum for Intercultural Philosophy* 1 (2000): them.polylog.org/1/ffr-en.htm; Ram Adhar Mall, *Intercultural Philosophy* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2000); Franz M. Wimmer, "Intercultural Philosophy: Problems and Perspectives," *CIRPIT Review* 4 (2013): 115–124.

⁵ Betancourt, "Philosophical Presuppositions of Intercultural Dialogue."

⁶ A meta-ethical approach to intercultural ethics involves examining the process through which norms are established across different cultures, as well as the criteria used to justify these norms. Moral/constructive realism lies between the two other main meta-ethical approaches, namely moral realism and moral anti-realism. Moral realism posits that ethical norms are inherent in or can be discovered within what is considered "real," whether in the physical world or a realm beyond it (such as certain forms of metaphysical or religious ethics). According to this perspective, ethical norms are objective because they are derived from a reality independent of the human mind. For instance, the church's natural law theory typically assumes a form of moral realism, asserting that ethical positions can be grounded in a reality external to individuals or cultures making ethical judgments. It emphasizes shared human characteristics rooted in the human body as a basis for universal norms. On the other hand, moral anti-realism contends that ethical norms do not exist objectively in a reality independent of the human mind. Instead, they are purely mental constructs

For example, the reality of climate change exists regardless of whether we think it exists. It is, however, our responsibility, together with the scientific community, to ensure that we get the facts and develop an ethical response as adequately as possible. This is aligned with Longino's contextual empiricist account of knowledge.⁷ It is empiricist because it requires theories or hypotheses to be based on reality and thus demonstrable within a certain contextual framework. It is contextual insofar as it recognizes the role of contextual values, background beliefs, and assumptions in the internal regime of science and its context of validation.

Intercultural dialogue on ethics involves not only the construction of norms but also a conversation about how we read independent reality. Because there is a plurality of interpretations of reality and norms, there is a need for mediation within a community to establish an acceptable reading based on shared norms of justification or validation.

Transformative Criticism and the Habermasian Equality Criterion

In the context of the natural sciences, Longino points out that science is a social knowledge that is constructed “not by individuals applying a method but by individuals in interaction with one another in ways that modify their observations, theories, and hypotheses and patterns of reasoning.”⁸ This social nature of knowledge provides a system of checks or controls on individual subjective preferences in the very process of the production of knowledge. One such control is the requirement for knowledge to be intersubjectively verifiable. This provides a mechanism to

and are not “real” in the same sense as physical objects. According to this view, it is impossible to evaluate the validity of any cultural norm outside of the cultural context in which it exists. Richard Evanoff, “Introducing Intercultural Ethics,” in *Intercultural Communication*, ed. G. Rings and S. Rasinger (Cambridge University Press, 2020), 189–198, doi.org/10.1017/9781108555067.

⁷ Helen Longino, “What is Social about Social Epistemology?,” *Journal of Philosophy* 119, no. 4 (2022): 7–9, doi.org/10.5840/jphil2022119413

⁸ Helen Longino, “Multiplying Subjects and the Diffusion of Power,” *Journal of Philosophy* 88, no. 11 (1991): 670, doi.org/10.5840/jphil1991881114.

monitor the influence of subjective preferences, ideologies, and biases in the production of knowledge.

More than the researcher's attitude toward the object of study, objectivity in Longino's contextual empiricist approach refers to the degree to which a (scientific) community allows transformative criticism, for both its procedures and results. Longino identifies four criteria for attaining transformative criticism and thus objectivity. First, there should exist recognized channels for criticism. These include regular public forums such as journals, colloquiums, and so on. Secondly, there must be shared standards within the scientific community so that those who are criticized accept the criteria by which their works are being assessed. Thirdly, the (scientific) community must be responsive to the ongoing critical discussion, although the term "community" can be misunderstood. While one might initially assume it refers to a unified global scientific community made up of smaller identical subsets, this overlooks the diverse social and historical contexts that shape each community differently. Longino suggests viewing communities as dynamic entities with overlapping values, norms, and memberships, or sometimes conflicting interests.⁹ Fourth, there should be equality of intellectual authority within the (scientific) community. This means that no set of assumptions should predominate because of the political power of its proponents. Longino appropriated this equality criterion from Habermas.

Habermas' Ideal Speech Situation

Discourse and argumentation, according to Habermas, are distorted by domination and authority structures.¹⁰ Social repression, violence, and

⁹ Helen Longino, "The Fate of Knowledge in Social Theories of Science," in *Socializing Epistemology*, ed. F. Schmitt (Rowman and Littlefield, 1994), 146.

¹⁰ Self-expression is thwarted, and neurotic disturbances are produced by repressive socialization means. Through rationalizations, a person can hide even from themselves the real reason for or origins of their behavior. Ideologies are rationalizations on the institutional level. They serve to maintain institutions that are unjustifiable. Psychoanalysis and ideological critique help people to

censorship, as well as the psychological baggage of individuals, can distort the communication process. An ideal speech situation is a communication structure that precludes such internal or external constraints. Such a structure exists when there is freedom and equal access for all the participants in a discourse to put forward their interpretations, justifications, objections, or refutations.¹¹ Otherwise, the result or consensus will be less than rational, meaning that it is not the product of the force of the better argument but of hidden or open manipulations. This “general symmetry requirement” can be further broken down into the following: 1) everyone has an equal chance to initiate and maintain a discourse and apply “constative speech acts,” that is, to ask and respond to queries, as well as to make objections, arguments, and refutations, to ensure that every assertion is subjected to critical examination; 2) all must have an equal chance to manifest their feelings, intentions, and attitudes to ensure transparency of one’s inner being, not only to oneself but to others; and 3) each person must have an equal chance to command, oppose, permit, forbid, or exclude so that no one will assume privileges in terms of single-sided norms for justification. This also ensures that all will have an equal opportunity to start and maintain a discourse.

In a pure communicative action, the participants are presumed to be conscious of the standards they follow and adhere only to the norms that they deem correct and which they can justify. They, therefore, do not act from unconscious intentions nor from hidden motives to deceive. For Habermas, it is the task of the critique of ideology and of psycho-analytic therapy to reveal the external and internal constraints in discourse, which in their non-transparency influence behavior. Critique of ideology and psycho-analytic therapy belong to the mode of inquiry that Habermas calls the critically oriented sciences, which are founded to emancipate people from the constraints of discourse.

acknowledge their rationalizations and to restore their power to be rational and conscious of their interactions.

¹¹ Jürgen Habermas, “On Systematically Distorted Communication,” *Inquiry* 13, nos. 1–4 (1970): 205–218, doi.org/10.1080/00201747008601590.

Longino passes over the psychoanalytic causes of distortions in communication and focuses more on the institutional ideological structures that can thwart communication. Ideologies are rationalizations on the institutional level that serve to maintain institutions that are unjustifiable. It is the task of an adequate social theory to expose and criticize these ideologies. The ideal speech situation, however, can only be realized fully in an ideal way of life. Habermas admits that many times it does not reflect the state of discourse in reality.¹² One cannot separate the attainment of truth from the struggle to achieve freedom and justice in society. This does not mean that it is a useless concept; instead, it is an ideal that we can try to approximate in reality, a guide to measure every discourse and the resulting agreement.

Although Habermas speaks of systematically distorted communication and how this arises from repression, violence, and censorship in a general way, he hardly refers to the class antagonisms, conflicts of interests, and material inequalities that are at the foundation of ideologies that distort communication.¹³ More concretely than Habermas does, Longino points to how, for example, the lack of women and members of other racial/cultural groups within a (scientific) community protects the ideas stemming from the white male paradigm from the critical scrutiny of women and other racial/ethnic groups.

Longino thus argues for the importance of integrating the standpoint of “minority groups” like women and other races by underlining the epistemological advantage of considering a multiplicity of perspectives. When a group shares similar characteristics or backgrounds, certain cultural assumptions may go unnoticed. It is only when someone from outside that group, with different assumptions, can present an alternative perspective that the hidden presuppositions of the majority become

¹² See Julius Sensat Jr., *Habermas and Marxism: An Appraisal* (Sage Library of Social Science Research, 1979), 26.

¹³ See Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests* (Beacon Press, 1971). Critics of Habermas have pointed out that Habermas, in underlining the need to decenter scientific reason, has played down the role of class-struggle.

visible. In scientific communities, the inclusion of diverse viewpoints enhances the objectivity of the scientific enterprise. This leads to theories and hypotheses less influenced by individual biases or morally questionable cultural preferences.

While the criterion of equality of intellectual authority requires the duty of inclusion, for Longino, this does not mean that everyone would be granted equal authority on the matter, regardless of his or her experiences or training. Education is needed for an individual to come up with useful contributions. Persons with experience or a record of getting things right should also be granted more attention. However, if one simply listens to those who have acquired cognitive authority, there is the danger of ignoring new or “different” voices that also need to be heard. The public standards derived from both epistemic and contextual-cultural values function to precisely distinguish the weight that must be given to a particular perspective.¹⁴

Consensus as Dissociated from Truth

Unlike Habermas, Longino detaches consensus from the concept of truth. Habermas identifies as true those statements that are the product of a community consensus in an ideal speech situation. Habermas’s assertion is problematic.¹⁵ First, Longino points out that there is no guarantee in Habermas that the consensus in an ideal speech situation would be an adequate rendering of reality. How does one distinguish between a false and a true consensus? There is a need for some independent means to gauge the veracity of statements on which a consensus has been reached before one can assert that consensus attained in an ideal speech situation is a standard of truth.¹⁶ Secondly, there is also the question about changes in

¹⁴ Longino, “Multiplying Subjects and the Diffusion of Power,” 674.

¹⁵ Helen Longino, *Science as Social Knowledge: Values and Objectivity in Scientific Inquiry* (Princeton University Press, 1990), 197–202.

¹⁶ Mary Hesse, “Habermas’ Consensus Theory of Truth,” in *Revolutions and Reconstructions in the Philosophy of Science*, ed. M. Hesse (Indiana University Press, 1980), 206–231.

consensus over time. Does this imply that the truth status of the statements is caught up in a process of change? According to Habermas, this is indeed the case. Hesse notes: "There remains a tension in Habermas between truth defined in terms of consensus in the ideal speech community on the one hand, and the recognition of changing conceptual frameworks on the other."¹⁷ Thirdly, what if there is no consensus on a particular problem? Does this mean that there is no truth of the matter? Furthermore, is it possible to arrive at a consensus that a particular scientific theory is true?

In Longino's contextualist account, the notion of consensus is independent or dissociated from the concept of truth. A proposition may be judged acceptable or justifiable by a global scientific community, but even in an ideal speech situation, it still does not mean that it is true in a realist sense. Multiple and even incompatible theories (grounded on divergent philosophical-cultural presuppositions) can be considered (scientific) knowledge, so long as they satisfy locally shared standards.

This is aligned with the semantic or model-theoretic theory of theories.¹⁸ It conceives theory as an articulation of aspects of reality through some portion of relations/structures. As Longino states in an interview, "I have a belief about our own cognitive capacities that has the consequence that if we do succeed in describing the world, we can't know that we've succeeded. All we know is that there is a kind of local match between our descriptions and some natural processes."¹⁹ Feminists have shown, for instance, how patriarchal and other ideological elements have been utilized to describe natural processes and relations in science. Longino observes elsewhere that "cells, gene action, and organisms have been modeled as marriage, families, and factories and cybernetic networks respectively."²⁰ Accepting these models necessitates not only checking the

¹⁷ Hesse, "Habermas' Consensus Theory of Truth," 219.

¹⁸ See Bas Van Fraassen, *The Scientific Image* (Clarendon, 1988).

¹⁹ Werner Callebaut, ed., *Taking the Naturalistic Turn, or How Real Philosophy of Science is Done* (University of Chicago Press, 1993), 27.

²⁰ Helen Longino, "Subjects, Power and Knowledge: Description and Prescription in Feminist Philosophies of Science," in *Feminist Epistemologies*, ed. L. Alcoff and E. Potter (Routledge, 1993), 275.

validity of the analogies of structure but also analyzing how ideological elements are transferred from one field to another.

Granting Epistemological Privilege to Marginalized Groups

Epistemic equality ensures that marginalized individuals have an equal chance to contribute to the worldwide generation of knowledge. Unfair and inequitable communication systems, institutions, and behaviors can perpetuate and worsen current socioeconomic disparities and injustices. With epistemic injustice, some social groups can face unfair discrimination in their role as knowers due to biases against them, involving factors like gender, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, vocal tone, accent, and more.²¹

Ismay Barwell notes the lack of guarantee in Longino's framework that critical perspectives from marginalized groups would be present. By contrast, this is assured in Sandra Harding's concept of "strong objectivity," which requires "reinventing ourselves as others." This refers to a way of seeking knowledge that personally takes into account the standpoint of "others." It also asks that researchers lay bare their background assumptions, as well as requires that critical theories from the viewpoint of the "others" in society be developed.²²

²¹ Morten Fibieger Byskov, "What Makes Epistemic Injustice an 'Injustice'?", *Journal of Social Philosophy* 52, no. 1 (2020): doi.org/10.1111/josp.12348; See also Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *The End of the Cognitive Empire: The Coming of Age of Epistemologies of the South* (Duke University Press, 2018), doi.org/10.1215/9781478002000.

²² Sandra Harding, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women's Lives* (Cornell University Press, 1991), 268–295. Harding developed the concept of strong objectivity/reflexivity from a standpoint epistemological approach, which presupposes that certain social locations generate less partial or less distorted views of reality. The social location of the oppressed and the marginalized is a scientific resource for maximizing objectivity. Longino however critiques Harding's concept of strong objectivity, which seems to suggest that there is a neat continuum from the most distorted to the least distorted truth, which is the most inclusive: "The least distorting is that which begins from as many life situations as are constructed as Other by mainstream discourses." Helen Longino, "Feminist Standpoint Theory and the Problems of Knowledge," *Signs* 19, no. 1 (1993): 211–212.

Barwell similarly notes that an oppressed group does not necessarily possess a critical perspective simply because of their experience of oppression. “A critical perspective is achieved only after a group works out an ‘immanent critique’ of an existing set of beliefs and the social arrangements which they justify. This ‘immanent critique’ reveals inconsistencies in the package of theory and world that is on offer. The critique will show not just that the package is inconsistent on its own terms but also how it is inconsistent and thus opens up the way to an alternative amended version.”²³ The “immanent critique” should be open as well to further criticisms so that any privilege is temporary and only in connection with a particular set of arrangements.

The second concern of Barwell about Longino’s framework relates to how the critical points of view from marginalized groups can be assessed and integrated. Harding’s strong objectivity/reflexivity requires that a researcher consider, even while merely conceptualizing their research, theories that are being developed from the viewpoint of “others.” This prerequisite helps to ensure a more critical discussion concerning background beliefs and assumptions because the alternative view of groups on the periphery has already been considered beforehand, and this can be done even by those who do not come from marginalized social locations.

In contrast to Harding’s standpoint approach, Longino’s contextual empiricist account does not attribute epistemological privilege to certain groups. For Longino, it is important to have different points of view, not primarily because of the epistemological privilege of the oppressed, but because only in the presence of such conflicting points of view can some

²³ Ismay Barwell, “Towards a Defence of Objectivity,” in *Knowing the Difference: Feminist Perspectives in Epistemology*, ed. K. Lennon and M. Whitford (Routledge, 1994), 90. Toward epistemic equality, Miller and Pinto propose a democratic approach that involves equal participation of the following: 1) Recognized experts possessing relevant expertise, with minimal bias towards those with greater personal or institutional renown; 2) Individuals with pertinent but unacknowledged expertise based on experience; 3) Relevant stakeholders, particularly from marginalized sectors, in the discourse of generating knowledge. Unlike Barwell, they do not elaborate on the need for an “immanent critique” among marginalized groups. Boaz Miller and Meital Pinto, “Epistemic Equality: Distributive Epistemic Justice in the Context of Justification,” *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal* 32, no. 2 (2022): 173–203, doi.org/10.1353/ken.2022.0011.

background assumptions rise to the surface.²⁴ However, Longino expresses openness to granting partial epistemological privilege. In any community, one viewpoint may temporarily hold greater importance than others. However, stubbornly adhering to this perspective despite criticism goes against the second standard of objectivity within communities. Moreover, for her, it is also expedient to take the necessary steps so that alternative perspectives are developed enough to become real sources of criticism.²⁵ This aligns with the idea that efforts should be made to help marginalized groups develop critical theories from their particular perspectives.

Intercultural Conversation on Ethics within Christian Communities

In Pope Francis's call for the church to become more synodal, he strongly encourages the broadest consultation possible on matters of the church, with a diverse representation of voices, especially among those on the peripheries. Furthermore, in *Amoris Laetitia*, the pope bridged the divide between the inductive approach in social ethics and the deductive method in sexual ethics by endorsing a method of generating moral knowledge that is more inductive, historically conscious, and appreciative of cultures and developments in the sciences.²⁶ Aligned with the above developments, and recognizing the importance of transformative criticism in the production of (moral) knowledge, we propose that intercultural dialogue on ethics in Christian communities appropriate the following criteria to guide intercultural conversations:

²⁴ Helen Longino, "Essential Tensions—Phase Two: Feminist, Philosophical, and Social Studies of Science," in *A Mind of One's Own: Feminist Essays on Reason and Objectivity*, ed. L. Antony and C. Witte (Westview Press, 1993), 270, doi.org/10.4324/9780429502682.

²⁵ Longino, "Essential Tensions," 270.

²⁶ Todd A. Salzman and Michael G. Lawler, *Introduction to Catholic Theological Ethics: Foundations and Applications* (Orbis Books, 2019), 319–338.

Presence of Public Venues for Dialogue/Criticism

It is crucial to establish recognized avenues for critique within the community. For instance, within the church, these avenues include customary public platforms such as journals and symposiums, where theologians can scrutinize each other's contributions critically. Additionally, it is essential to acknowledge other platforms where scriptural interpretation and critique of ideologies can take place at both pastoral and grassroots levels. These may involve basic ecclesial communities, as well as various forms of associations or sectoral groups within the parish/diocese that engage in the reading and interpretation of Scripture and discernment on ethical issues.

Explication of the Community's Set of Shared Standards

Theological or ecclesial communities should articulate the common criteria they employ in interpreting Scripture and making moral judgments. This ensures that individuals whose interpretations face scrutiny can acknowledge the standards used to evaluate their work. Ideally, these criteria encompass both the scientific principles and moral values upheld by the community. The established criteria, though, are subject to adjustment or revision if they cease to yield productive or relevant outcomes. While usable criteria can guide investigations at any moment, they remain open to modification in response to alternative experiences, especially those of marginalized communities, or to different values revealed by changing circumstances.

Community Responsiveness to Criticisms

This requires a transformative responsiveness to the ongoing critical discussions of various communities. The term "community" can be somewhat misleading as it might suggest a church composed of sub-communities that merely mirror the universal church. This perspective overlooks the diverse social and historical contexts of Christian communities and how they are

shaped by distinct histories, orientations, and interests. Instead, theological or ecclesial communities must be regarded as dynamic entities with intersecting values, standards, memberships, and sometimes conflicting interests. This perspective acknowledges not only the fluid nature of communities, recognizing, for instance, the diversity within a culture or among women, indigenous groups, and so on, but also the intersection of their interests with those of other liberation-oriented groups.

When discussing ethical issues, various cultural communities can participate in a critical exchange of ideas. The goal of this dialogue is not solely to reach a broad and universal agreement on the issue, but rather to facilitate the refinement, correction, rejection, and ideological scrutiny of interpretations.

Equality of Intellectual Authority

Within a Christian community, there should exist an equality of intellectual authority. This principle from Habermas implies that no particular set of assumptions should hold sway simply due to the political influence wielded by those who support them. The absence of women and individuals from other racial or cultural backgrounds within a theological community, which consequently allows the white male paradigm to prevail, violates this principle of equality. Such a situation shields ideas originating from the white male paradigm from critical examination by women and other racial groups.

Partial Epistemological Privilege to Marginalized Groups

Adding to the above four criteria for transformative criticism, I introduce a fifth condition—that is, granting partial epistemological privilege to marginalized groups within Christian communities. In Longino's conception of knowledge, if a theory is embraced within a (scientific) community where women or other cultural groups are marginalized then that theory likely reflects the values of the dominant societal groups. These

values probably remain unquestioned and unchallenged. Hence, it is imperative to ensure not only the presence of critical perspectives in general but particularly the perspectives of marginalized groups within society. Given that women and other racial or cultural groups have historically been overlooked within theological communities, they should be afforded temporary privilege. This implies that theological communities should actively encourage and support the development of theories from the perspectives of the marginalized. Extending partial epistemological privilege to oppressed groups also entails the act of “reinventing oneself as other.” This involves consideration of the perspectives of marginalized individuals within society at the early stage of conceptualizing a moral framework/response. However, it is essential to recognize that an individual’s perception of who constitutes the marginalized and how they experience oppression may be constrained by one’s perspective. Therefore, this condition should be accompanied by the efforts of theological communities to facilitate and amplify the voices of marginalized groups themselves.

An example of this is the Synod on Synodality’s proposal to establish a “Church-based research initiative or observatory on disability” (no. 60) to strengthen the participation in the Church’s life and mission of people with disabilities (no. 60).²⁷ Ideally, this must be composed mostly of people with disabilities, with a fairly equal representation of men and women. Listening to their perspectives helps to dispel certain theological misunderstandings, such as the notion of disability as a punishment or consequence of sin or, conversely, a blessing or divine “gift” that glorifies suffering itself. It challenges attitudes like paternalism, which treats individuals with disabilities as lesser or as subjects of pity, and assistentialism, which sees them merely as recipients of help, failing to recognize their ability to contribute meaningfully to the church’s mission and community life.

²⁷ XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission: Final Document,” www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/news/2024-10-26_final-document/ENG---Documento-finale.pdf.

The epistemological privilege afforded to marginalized groups is partial for several reasons. First, when a previously subordinated group gains a more dominant position, it loses this privilege. Secondly, interpretations from the standpoint of marginalized groups still need to undergo critical scrutiny or assessment in comparison to the widely accepted standards of the broader Christian community. Interpretations from the viewpoint of a specific oppressed group may still confront or face challenges from the standpoint of others within the Christian community, particularly other marginalized groups. Such epistemological privilege of the marginalized can draw a theological basis from Matthew 25:31–46, where God appears or reveals Godself in the face of the hungry, thirsty, sick, and imprisoned.

The above criteria ensure that what is considered moral knowledge is not merely a product of individual subjective preferences or solely the bias of a dominant group. Instead, it results from the Christian community's rigorous critical evaluation.

Conclusion

Anchored in a discourse-centered understanding of culture and a critical realist/contextual empiricist approach to intercultural ethics, I have argued in this chapter for the need of transformative criticism in intercultural dialogues. This involves critiquing ideas collaboratively and adjusting outcomes based on the feedback received. To enhance objectivity and equality among participants, we have identified five criteria that must be satisfied: 1) the presence of public venues for dialogue/criticism; 2) the explication of the community's set of shared standards; 3) the community's responsiveness to criticisms; 4) the equality of intellectual authority; and 5) the granting of partial epistemological privilege to marginalized groups. Together, these five criteria will help us develop a more robust and culturally sensitive intercultural ethics.

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8. Seeing the Unseen? Silenced Voices, Excluded Knowledge, and the Question of Representation in the World Church

Sigrid Rettenbacher

The biblical accounts of Easter telling the encounter of the resurrected Christ with different people all revolve around a new way of seeing or—more precisely—around recognizing something that has been so unexpected that one has not been able to see it before. Mary of Magdala, the disciples of Emmaus, and Thomas, all come to understand reality in a more adequate way after hearing a word or seeing a deed of the resurrected one. Interestingly enough, as the Christian tradition developed over time, this capability of seeing the so far unseen seems to have been lost. The attempt to preserve the memory and witness of the beginnings of Christianity has led to an alluring certainty that resulted in blind spots within the discourses of the church, which has often refused to reflect on processes of powerful marginalization and exclusion in its own tradition. The example of Mary Magdalene, who has changed from the first witness of the resurrection and *apostola apostolorum* to a sinful whore and prostitute to diminish the importance of a woman in a male-written tradition, is just one case in point.¹ Even if Pope Francis has once again drawn attention to the significance of Mary Magdalene as *apostola apostolorum*, the consequences for the status of women within the Roman Catholic Church have not been drawn.²

¹ Silke Petersen, *Maria aus Magdala. Die Jüngerin, die Jesus liebte* (Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2011).

² Regina Heyder, for example, criticizes “Churchsplaining,” a “wohlmeinend-patriarchale[s] Erklären der Kirche durch Kleriker,” that is a well-meaning but still patriarchal explanation of the church by clerics. Regina Heyder, “Subversive Stimmen von Frauen. Perspektiven der Kirchengeschichte,” *Lebendige Seelsorge* 71, no. 3 (2020): 174. The South African theologian Nontando Hadebe describes the exclusion of women by the hierarchical structures of the church as an act of violence. Referring to Teresia Hinga, a theologian from Kenya, Hadebe points to the “männliche Dominanz als Norm des Christentums,” which results in a top-down ecclesiology that

This chapter is an attempt to make visible the unseen in the Christian tradition by reflecting on the question of representation and silenced voices, as well as excluded knowledge in the tradition of the church. The concrete starting point is the worldwide Synod on Synodality and the discussions around the question of women, gender, and LGBTQIA+ in the world church. Underneath this discussion lurks the question of how to deal with differences within the community of the world church, how those differences affect the unity of the church, and how to tackle the tension between universality and particularity in the church as a worldwide community. Thus, the challenges of the Synod on Synodality are very much connected to the challenges of the project of intercultural ethics. In the following, I want to present some preliminary remarks, observations, and questions concerning the issue of doing ethics in a world church. The intercultural aspect of this issue is considered from the perspective of feminist, post-/decolonial,³ and critical whiteness studies by focusing on certain discourse politics that can be observed in ecclesial contexts. The focus is not so much on the academic context of doing ethics in an intercultural way but on discourse strategies and representation politics used by official representatives of the church, especially the question of how references to the world church are deployed in their discourses.

not only affects women, but all people concerned about the rights and well-being of those at the lower end of the hierarchy. Nontando Hadebe, “Wie wir uns selbst befreien. The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians und Catholic Women Speak Network,” in *Catholic Women. Menschen aus aller Welt für eine gerechtere Kirche*, ed. U. Leimgruber (Echter, 2021), 141.

³ For the relation between “postcolonial” and “decolonial,” see Stefan Silber, “Das entkolonisierte Klassenzimmer. Postkolonial-theologische Perspektiven für die Religionspädagogik,” *Österreichisches Religionspädagogisches Forum* 31, no. 1 (2023): 13–29, doi.org/10.25364/10.31:2023.1.2, 18–19. In this chapter, both terms are used interchangeably, focusing on their shared critique of colonialism and its aftermath.

Challenging “Active Ignorance” by Bringing Different Perspectives Together

When trying to reflect on theological and ethical questions in an intercultural way, it is helpful to make clear from the very beginning where one stands, as one’s own context inevitably influences one’s own way of thinking and doing theology. I am a white Catholic theologian from Austria, which means I write from a privileged perspective in many ways. But I am also a woman in the Catholic Church, which means my perspective is marginalized, in the sense that women are represented by men and are excluded from decision-making processes within the church, since these processes are controlled by men. Seen through an intersectional lens, my own perspective is thus simultaneously privileged and excluded. The experience of being privileged in certain areas in comparison to many others, and at the same time knowing how discrimination and exclusion feel, has shaped my interest in approaches to theology that offer a (self-)critical perspective on theological tradition and its under-scrutinized certainties. Thus, my interest in feminist and decolonial perspectives in theology stems from personal experiences within the church.

I want to start my reflections with an insight from critical whiteness studies that has informed my own thinking and can clarify theological reflections as well by challenging certain theological assumptions that are taken as self-evident. Critical whiteness studies emphasize the fact that the privilege of being white is clearly felt by those who do not take part in this privilege, but it is invisible to those who profit from this privilege.⁴ This thought can be expanded to what Charles Mills calls “white ignorance.”⁵ While marginalized people have an interest in understanding the world of

⁴ See Sara Ahmed, “Declarations of Whiteness: The Non-Performativity of Anti-Racism,” *Meridians: Journal of Women, Race and Culture* 7, no. 1 (2006): 104–126; Jennifer Harvey, “What Would Zacchaeus Do? The Case for Disidentifying with Jesus,” in *Christology and Whiteness: What Would Jesus Do?*, ed. G. Yancy (Routledge, 2012), 84–86.

⁵ Charles W. Mills, “White Ignorance,” in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, ed. S. Sullivan and N. Tuana (State University of New York Press, 2007), 11–38.

privileged others to prevent detrimental and harmful situations, privileged groups do not have an interest in understanding the world of the marginalized as it would call their own worldview and habits into question. Privileged groups thus embrace active ignorance—refusing to know things that could be known—in order not to be compelled to interrogate their own presuppositions and privileges. This active ignorance has a social dimension as well, which means that it structures and influences societies and institutions—for example, the church. Of course, this habit of ignoring what one does not want to know because it is inconvenient does not only apply to the attitude of white people toward people of color. From an intersectional perspective, it can also be applied to diverse forms of discrimination (gender, social status, laity vs. clergy, etc.). Thus, one has to ask how the church’s position is influenced by privileges—to the exclusion of other perspectives—and how it is possible to incorporate multiple and diverse perspectives into the church’s point of view in order to correct this epistemic power imbalance and its practical consequences.

The insights from critical whiteness studies help us scrutinize elements of ecclesial discourses that are often not reflected on. There is a difference between what one cannot speak about because it is linked to the vastness of the divine mystery, which transcends human insights, and what one does not want to or is not allowed to talk about because it would call into question some insights or advantages that privileged parties do not want to give up.⁶ Theo-logy (“talk about God”) and the passing on of faith (Romans 10:17) in the church are deeply dependent on language. One cannot grasp God or witness God’s deeds and history with humankind beyond the realm of language. Theology is thus a discursive enterprise. It is here where theology and postcolonial studies are intimately connected and where theology can learn from postcolonial perspectives and their

⁶ In German, I refer to this difference by using the juxtaposition of “Unsagbares” and “Ungesagtes.” Sigrid Rettenbacher, “Worüber man nicht spricht . . . Eine Theologie des Ungesagten,” in *Spielarten der Macht. Theologie orten und räumen mit Hans-Joachim Sander*, ed. C. Kern, J. Gruber and C. Bauer (Matthias Grünewald Verlag, 2024), 251–286.

awareness of power dynamics and how they relate to the construction of reality and identities.⁷ Thus, for theology and the church, reflecting the question of identity politics, representation, and power is indispensable and irreducible—even if such questions are not normally asked in mainstream theological and ecclesiological discourses. The tension between that which cannot be said and that which one does not want or is not allowed to talk about is part of the power politics of the church (as can be seen in the abuse of power in various church contexts)—even if reflecting on this tension has over a long period of time been and is still part of that which is not spoken about. Or, to put it another way, it is part of the active ignorance of the Christian tradition. As language and discourse are closely connected to representation and thus to the question of who or what can (not) be seen, theology and the church must confront the question of the unseen in the Christian tradition(s).

Women, Gender, and LGBTQIA+: Examples of the Unseen in the Church and their Implications for Doing Ethics in an Intercultural Way

It is here where I want to connect the question of the unsaid or unseen to the world church and ethical topics in an intercultural setting. I want to do this by referring to three exemplary observations in the recent official discourse of the Catholic Church that seem—at first sight—not to be connected but are in fact closely intertwined. The examples are taken from the European context but reveal a strong entanglement with questions concerning the world church.

Pope Francis's Visit to Hungary

During his visit to Hungary in 2023, Pope Francis criticized Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's attitude toward migration politics (which is one of the

⁷ Rettenbacher, "Worüber man nicht spricht."

strictest and most exclusionary in the European Union), but he shared his critique of the “ideological colonization”⁸ of mind through gender discourse⁹—thus indirectly supporting Orbán’s questionable attitude and politics regarding women, gender, and LGBTQIA+ issues. This shows the church’s ambivalent and mixed understanding of what it means to stand on the side of the marginalized and excluded. There seem to be areas of exclusion and marginalization that are privileged in the discourse of the church and where the church has a critical and also influential voice in society (e.g., migration, poverty, and environmental issues). And there are excluded topics in the church’s ethical reflection—such as gender, women’s rights, and some issues related to sexuality—where the church itself produces excluded others.

The Letter to the German Bishops

During the worldwide process of the Synod on Synodality, some topics like women in the church or women’s ordination, as well as a variety of other gender and LGBTQIA+ issues, became very prominent. Those topics have also been central to the Synodal Path in Germany, which started two years before the worldwide Synod on Synodality and has, for example, led to a change in ecclesial labor legislation in some German dioceses, where for the first time sexual orientation is no longer a ground for dismissal. Even if the question of the position of women in the church, along with LGBTQIA+ topics, has been present in the continental stages and then in the universal phase of the Synod on Synodality, those issues have often been minimized in their relevance by placing them in the

⁸ Francis, “Address at the Meeting with the Authorities, Civil Society and the Diplomatic Corps in Budapest,” April 28, 2023, www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2023/april/documents/20230428-ungheria-autorita.html. Even if Pope Francis is against criminalizing homosexuality (“Pope and Protestant Leaders Denounce Anti-gay Laws,” *BBC*, February 5, 2023, www.bbc.com/news/world-64532639), his stand against “gender ideology” discursively supports the discrimination and also persecution of LGBTQIA+ persons.

⁹ For a critical discussion of “gender ideology” see Gerhard Marschütz, *Gender-Ideologie!? Eine katholische Kritik* (Echter, 2023).

broader context of the world church. Allegedly, those topics gain emphasis only in some Western countries but are not relevant in other parts of the world. Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the Vatican's Secretary of State, and Cardinal Víctor Manuel Fernández, the head of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, officially informed the German Bishops' Conference in November 2023 not to waste their time with the question of women's ordination or LGBTQIA+ issues, as the church's position regarding those topics will not change.¹⁰ These issues—so the argument goes—are only discussed in a few Western countries, so they cannot be dealt with in the context of the world church as they would threaten the unity of the Catholic Church. Furthermore, discussing these questions in a worldwide context is often equated to neocolonial paternalism. Of course, the argument neglects the fact that there is a plurality of positions in non-Western parts of the world—thus homogenizing and essentializing those contexts—and has not posed the question of representation: Who speaks for those contexts and whose interests are (not) represented?

Import of Priests

To address the lack of priests in Western societies, the church sticks to what can be read as a neo-colonial policy of “importing” priests from countries of the Global South, thereby sidestepping the question of ordination requirements.¹¹ Viewing the policy of “importing” foreign priests through a postcolonial perspective and connecting it to feminist and intersectional questions reveals an ethical dimension to this pastoral practice as well.

¹⁰ “Einige deutsche Bischöfe schienen das nicht zu verstehen. Glaubenspräfekt Fernández: Papst ist kein liberaler Reformier,” *katholisch.de*, December 31, 2023, [katholisch.de/artikel/49971-glaubenspraefekt-fernandez-papst-ist-kein-liberaler-reformer](https://www.katholisch.de/artikel/49971-glaubenspraefekt-fernandez-papst-ist-kein-liberaler-reformer).

¹¹ Besides the ordination of women, the ordination of homosexual or transgender men is also excluded in ecclesial discourse politics.

Implications

The three examples show that questions of power, representation, and hierarchy are strongly entangled with questions of gender and sexuality in the Catholic Church. The church as a hierarchical, patriarchal, heteronormative system founded on a deeply entrenched clericalism is based on a system of (epistemic) exclusion of topics that would call this system into question and show the necessity of alternatives.¹² This mode of exclusion is a systemic part of the church. It helps—in an attitude of active ignorance—to stabilize and support the status quo. Intercultural relations are sometimes used as a factor to support this system. It is only since Pope Francis—the first Latin American pope—that non-Western perspectives have been prominently brought into the official discourse of the world church. Still, the use of these perspectives is limited to certain areas (like creation and relatedness as, for example, in *Querida Amazonia* or *Laudato Si'*), and it does not go hand in hand with an attempt to decolonize theological thinking in the church on a broad scale. However, when questions of gender and sexuality are at issue, the world church, decolonization and non-Western perspectives are willingly used as an argument against tackling these urgent theological and ethical questions. An alleged “decolonization of mind” is used as a hypocritical fake argument to prolong structures of suppression and exclusion in those areas.

Non-Western perspectives are still marginalized in the world church—or at least limited to specific areas—and there is no strong emphasis on decolonizing a Western mode of thinking within the church. At the same time, allegedly non-Western perspectives and decolonial arguments are willingly used as an argument to exclude critical topics—such as gender equality or sexual orientation—and to prolong structures of exclusion and suppression. Therefore, the discourse politics of using the world church as an argument in theological and ethical debates becomes itself ethically

¹² See footnote 2.

fraught, revealing active ignorance on different levels, thus supporting an unjust system of privileges.

Insights from Sociology of Knowledge and Postcolonial Theories

It is illuminating to confront the discourse politics that uses tradition and the unity of the church as a strong argument and often relies on active ignorance with insights from the sociology of knowledge and postcolonial theories. The sociology of knowledge tells us that our understanding of reality is socially constructed.¹³ This is also true of traditions and norms as culturally and socially influenced expressions of moral intuitions. Both can be perceived as social constructs that are naturalized and stabilized by the process of socialization. In the context of faith communities such as the church, the process of stabilizing norms and traditions is often reinforced by sacralization, which means that the norm is connected to a divine origin, thus making it even harder to put the norm under scrutiny.¹⁴ Therefore, through being socialized into the community of the church, one cannot easily scrutinize the dominant forms of knowledge, as traditions and norms seem to be naturally given or even rooted in divine law. The social constructedness of norms is difficult to perceive, as it is hidden and masked through the process of socialization. This process therefore serves—in a circular way—to stabilize the status quo and prevent questioning, altering, and changing the socially constructed norms and traditions.

¹³ Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Doubleday, 1966).

¹⁴ This is also true for a colonial worldview which is strongly entangled with the Christian faith: “Historically, it is important to recognize that Christian theology was not simply affected by colonialism. Christian theologies of empire were not simply a by-product of the colonial era; they helped to justify, sustain and sacralise it. Christian ethics provides some core building blocks that made Christian colonialism acceptable.” Selina Stone, “Can Christian Ethics Be Saved? Colonialism, Racial Justice, and the Task of Decolonising Christian Theology,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 37, no. 1 (2024): 5, doi.org/10.1177/09539468231213557.

What the sociology of knowledge tells us about the performativity of norms and traditions becomes even more complex and challenging when combined with insights from postcolonial theories about discursive identity constructions, representation, and power. Postcolonial theories claim that reality is not only described by discourses but that it is the discourses themselves that construct reality. In the discursive construction of reality, however, the balance of power is not equally distributed. There are those who have the power to speak and thus to define and represent reality. And there are those—the “others”—who do not have the power to speak for themselves and are thus defined and represented by the powerful. Therefore, questions of discursive identity construction, representation, and power are deeply connected to processes of marginalization and exclusion. Seen from a theological perspective, the church can be read as the place of such identity constructions.¹⁵ It is the place where Christian identity is discursively constructed and performatively enacted by bringing into language what happened at Easter and by spreading the Good News over times and places. Thus, it is important to put ecclesial discourses under scrutiny in order to see where they do not guarantee or safeguard Christian identity, but in fact possibly imperil the Christian message by unjust forms of exclusions.¹⁶ Such critical reflections are all the more necessary, as it is not only the colonial world that was constructed by way of discourse and power. Colonial cartography and its forms of knowledge—in short, coloniality—influence how we understand the current world as well. The church and its knowledge, traditions, and norms take part in this coloniality, too.

When coloniality is based on a certain perception of the world seen through the lens of colonial power, alternative forms of knowledge and discourses are excluded. Those excluded forms of knowledge are linked to

¹⁵ Sigrid Rettenbacher, *Außerhalb der Ekklesiologie keine Religionstheologie. Eine postkoloniale Theologie der Religionen* (Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2019).

¹⁶ Rettenbacher, “Worüber man nicht spricht”; Sigrid Rettenbacher, “Zerbrochene Gewissheiten in verwobenen Geschichten. Ein post-/dekolonial inspirierter Blick auf Theologie und Kirche,” in *Postcolonial Studies interdisziplinär*, ed. J. Allerstorfer-Hertel, K. Winkler, and L. Kaelin (forthcoming 2026).

complex and entangled histories of epistemicides and genocides in which questions of religion, race, social status, and gender are intricately interwoven.¹⁷ Thus, the church—as the place of Christian identity construction—takes part in these colonial histories and narratives of excluded knowledge as well. This form of colonial knowledge emerged in the precolonial Spain of the Reconquista in the sixteenth century, where humankind was divided into those with the right and wrong religion. During the colonial expansions, those discourses about religion were transferred to other areas like race and gender, connected to the question of being human (or not), and finally universalized. The discursive and social constructedness of those discourses, however, has often been forgotten.¹⁸ As a consequence, Western forms of knowledge—with certain perceptions of what counts as relevant knowledge but also with certain assumptions about religion, race, and gender—are portrayed as universal as a result of coloniality. Thus, it is through coloniality that we perceive certain particular forms of knowledge as allegedly universal truths.¹⁹

In the context of the church, being aware of coloniality means asking whether or how a hegemonic dominance of Western forms of knowledge has shaped ecclesial discourses in the past (i.e., in the genealogy of tradition) and in the present (i.e., in the normative effects of this tradition). Otherwise, an unawareness of the coloniality effective in ecclesial discourses leads to the paradoxical situation that certain Western norms that were exported to other parts of the world in the past come back in the

¹⁷ Ramón Grosfoguel, “The Structure of Knowledge in Westernized Universities: Epistemic Racism/ Sexism and the Four Genocides/Epistemicides of the Long 16th Century,” *Human Architecture. Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge* 11, no. 1 (2013): 73–90; Manuela Boatcă, “Gendering Global Entanglements: Decolonizing Inequalities,” in *Global Contestations of Gender Rights*, ed. A. Scheele, J. Roth, and H. Winkel (Bielefeld University Press, 2022), 45–62; José-Manuel Barreto and Ina Kerner, “Decolonizing Universalism? A Dialogue on Women’s Rights, Feminist Struggles and the Possibilities and Problems of Universal Norms,” in *Global Contestations of Gender Rights*, ed. A. Scheele, J. Roth and H. Winkel (Bielefeld University Press, 2022), 135–148.

¹⁸ Grosfoguel, “The Structure of Knowledge,” 84; Barreto and Kerner, “Decolonizing Universalism,” 138; Boatcă, “Gendering Global Entanglements,” 52.

¹⁹ Grosfoguel, “The Structure of Knowledge,” Barreto and Kerner, “Decolonizing Universalism,” Boatcă, “Gendering Global Entanglements.”

present as allegedly original non-Western traditions—as will be shown in the next section.

The postcolonial strategy of provincializing the center (i.e., dominant Western forms of knowledge) is not yet a mainstream interest within theology or the church. Rather, quite the contrary, when the church refers to provincializing the center, it uses the phrase as a strategic instrument to strengthen certain privileged positions and to fend off certain topics. Some of these topics are the question of women in the church, gender, or LGBTQIA+ rights—which, in the sense of active ignorance and with a heteropatriarchal and heteronormative impetus, shall remain at the margins. Thus, actual plurality in the world church is often made invisible in the church—via discursive strategies of essentializing, homogenizing, and othering. These strategies are used in order to emphasize the unity of the church, which is constructed through a Western-dominated perspective characterized by active ignorance. Therefore, seemingly naturally given traditions and norms are—due to the social constructedness of tradition mentioned above—difficult to put into question, criticize, or change, both on the level of the world church as well as on the level of the local church.

In this discursive and performative process, privileges and active ignorance are handed down as normative traditions and even sacralized so that it is hard to unlearn and provincialize dominant Western positions and perspectives. Moreover, the theological method of seeing, judging, and acting, which is often used to find answers to new challenges in ethical decision-making processes, is affected by the described insights from the sociology of knowledge and postcolonial theories which show the limits of this three-step process. The process of seeing, judging, and acting can be part of an active ignorance within the church: It is part of a complex system of power and representation and may be prone to abuse as well. If the seeing and judging are part of coloniality and exclude the unseen and that which is not spoken about, then the judging (as well as the resulting acting) is limited and does not rest on the best presuppositions, thus supporting

an unjust status quo. This shows that insights from postcolonial theories are central not only to theology but to ethics as well.²⁰

The Unity of the World Church as an Argument: Unseen Aspects and Discourse Policies

With this said, it is time to look at the argument of the world church in more detail—inspired by a decolonial perspective. As mentioned above, the unity of the world church is repeatedly used as an argument to stop discussions in the church. When it comes to certain ethical questions like the position of women in the church or the question of gender and LGBTQIA+ rights, the unity of the world church is used to keep the status quo and to preserve—in an act of active ignorance—the privileges of decision makers within the Catholic Church, which is structured as a male, heteronormative, heteropatriarchal, and clerical hierarchy.

The argument is presented in a way that intertwines theological and decolonial justifications. It firstly states that there is no necessity—even more, no possibility—to change the position of the church vis-à-vis women, gender, or members of the LGBTQIA+ community. The argument made is that equal rights and a more differentiated perspective only represent Western voices and are not shared by people from the Global South. Therefore, changing the teaching position of the church concerning those topics would put at stake the unity of the church and would not serve liberation purposes. On the contrary, it would be a neocolonial suppression of the Global South.²¹

Deploying the unity of the world church as a theological and decolonial argument, the discussion is brought to an end. However, if one takes a closer look at both aspects of the argument, the case is not that clear. First,

²⁰ See the special issue on “Racial Justice and Decolonizing Christian Ethics” of the *Studies in Christian Ethics* 37, no. 1 (2024).

²¹ For the case of homosexuality, see Caleb M. Day, “Decolonial Homophobia: Is Decolonisation Incompatible with LGBT+ Affirmation in Christian Ethics?,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 37, no. 1 (2024): 71–92, doi.org/10.1177/09539468231215304.

in no part of the world are theological positions concerning women, gender, and LGBTQIA+ rights clear cut. Otherwise, there would be no heated discussions going on.²² Second, it is right that neocolonial strategies should not be deployed, but if one takes a closer look, it is obvious that the more traditional positions concerning women, gender, and LGBTQIA+ are themselves the result of a colonial expansion of Western forms of knowledge, as will be shown shortly.²³ Therefore, it is necessary to look at the argument of the unity of the world church and its decolonial and neocolonial implications in more detail. It is important to understand how this argument functions and how it is related to the unseen and to active ignorance in the church.

Seen from a postcolonial perspective, the argument of the unity of the world church is far more complex than its representation in the official ecclesial discourse. When the world church is used as an argument, one has to ask about the representation processes on which this argument rests. Who has the power to speak for and represent the different parts of the world church? And which voices are silenced in these representation processes—that is, what are the unseen aspects of the concrete forms of representation? Even if the Synod on Synodality's agenda is to hear all voices in the church, the actual reality of church discourses still shows a different scenario. The representation of women, along with gender diverse, queer, and LGBTQIA+ persons, in church discourses—often through official representatives—seems to be based on strategies of homogenization, essentializing, and othering.²⁴ The countries of the

²² *Catholic Women Speak: Bringing Our Gifts to the Table*, ed. Catholic Women Speak Network (Paulist Press, 2015); *Catholic Women. Menschen aus aller Welt für eine gerechtere Kirche*, ed. U. Leimgruber (Echter, 2021).

²³ Day, "Decolonial Homophobia," 84–85.

²⁴ "Colonisation also erased histories of non-patriarchal gender expression and non-heteronormative sexuality. Pre-colonial gender and sexual diversity are forgotten, ignored, or attributed to outside Arabic influence, producing the view that homosexuality has always been 'un-African'. Recovering LGBT+ history in Uganda, India, Canada, Samoa, and Aotearoa/New Zealand is important decolonisation work." Day, "Decolonial Homophobia," 85. Thus, "Failing to acknowledge diversity repeats colonial reification of one monolithic 'African' viewpoint." Day, "Decolonial Homophobia," 83.

Global South are represented as a homogenous entity, where the positions in regard to gender and sexuality are presented as quite uniform. The actual plurality of voices in those countries is silenced. Thus, persons who try to opt for a more diverse perspective on gender and sexuality in the West as well as in the Global South are—through a process of othering—represented as outside the norm. To put it another way, the argument of the world church which—by active ignorance—tries to preserve the status quo in an unquestioned manner rests on producing excluded and unseen others through ecclesial discourses. An imagined unity of the church is thereby produced by making invisible actual plurality and differences.

Recent research has shown that there is a complex entanglement of discourses on religion, race, ethnicity, and gender in the colonial world and its aftermath, where forms of discrimination, suppression, and non-representation overlap in intersectional ways. The coloniality of power and the colonial difference still influence our perception of the world, and various forms of suppression and discrimination have to be analyzed through an intersectional lens.²⁵ Even feminist theories can be affected by this coloniality when the focus is on the position of white women exclusively, not recognizing that women of color or subaltern women have been influenced by Western gender norms in very different ways than white women. Thus, the very concept of gender and its connection to race, ethnicity, social status, and so on is itself deeply entangled in colonial histories and has to be scrutinized in regard to its participation in coloniality.²⁶ However, the classical argument of official church discourses

²⁵ See María Lugones, "Toward a Decolonial Feminism," *Hypatia* 25, no. 4 (2010): 742–759, jstor.org/stable/40928654, who is referring to Anibal Quijano and Walter D. Mignolo.

²⁶ Lugones, "Decolonial Feminism;" María Lugones, "Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System," *Hypatia* 22, no. 1 (2007): 186–219, jstor.org/stable/4640051. "What I have called modern colonial alterities are basically the 'others' of colonial men, the others of the colonially enforced, prototypical 'human.'" Boacã, "Gendering Global Entanglements," 52. Or to put it another way: "Universal humanity only included white male heterosexual Europeans. . . . Historically, European universalism has been only inclusive of Europeans, while non-Europeans were excluded from humanity. On the surface, universal humanity is inclusive and encompasses all human beings, but only at first sight. It has been historically exclusionary when faced with the definition of who is a human being. Therefore, along the global history of the modern/colonial world and patriarchy,

that the position regarding women, gender identities, and sexual orientation cannot be changed due to attitudes in the Global South rests on severe blind spots about the colonial past and its present effects.

There have been a variety of gender roles and sexual identities in the pre-colonial world, which have been dramatically changed through the history of colonial and missionary encounters. In quite a number of cultures, one finds examples of women occupying prominent roles in society and religion. Moreover, sexual orientations and gender roles have been much more varied than is reflected in Catholic discourses today, and there are examples of a third gender in countries of the Global South as well.²⁷ Of course, non-Western cultures used very different concepts and terms to describe their understanding of gender and sexuality in precolonial times, which did not correspond to Western concepts, interpretations, and perceptions. Those alternative ways of representation have, however, been made invisible over time due to the power of Western Christian discourse politics. So Western ways of speaking about gender and sexuality—whether more traditional or liberal—have a colonial history that has to be tackled and reflected on. This history is heavily dependent on the history of the church and its definition of sex and gender roles. Traditional ecclesial mainstream positions are—because of their connection to power and the privilege to define and represent—more prone to blind spots due to active ignorance, as can be illustrated by various examples from different contexts of the Global South.

When Spanish missionaries reached the Tagalog and Visayan areas in the Philippines in the sixteenth century, for example, they were confronted with a spiritual animist system where the position of spiritual leadership—

women, queers and natives have been labelled as non-human, less-human or inferior humans, contradicting both principles of humanity and equality.” Barreto and Kerner, “Decolonizing Universalism,” 138. During the colonization process cultures were also classified along the binary opposition of rational/irrational, civilized/uncivilized, male/female, superior/ inferior, etc. Rettenbacher, *Außerhalb der Ekklesiologie*, 191; Lugones, “Heterosexuality,” 192.

²⁷ Lugones, “Heterosexuality,” 196, 201; Carolyn Brewer, “*Baylan, Asog*, Transvestism, and Sodomy: Gender, Sexuality and the Sacred in Early Colonial Philippines,” *Intersections. Gender, History and Culture in the Asian Context* 2, no. 1 (1999): intersections.anu.edu.au/issue2/carolyn2.html.

the shamans—was predominantly taken over by women.²⁸ Men could only fill the position of a shaman when cross-dressing as a woman and when behaving like a female shaman. In other words, spiritual potency for males was only possible when it was linked with “non-conforming gender behaviour.”²⁹ So “the indigenous constructions of gender [that the missionaries encountered] . . . departed substantially from the patriarchal models with which they were familiar.”³⁰ As a consequence, the missionaries tried to fend off the foreign gender system by discursively connecting the female shamans and the male shamans dressed up and behaving as women with the devil and witchcraft. Thus, the Christian missionaries were able to combat the female-led spiritual system they encountered in the Philippines by introducing new representations that led to alternative performances.

In other countries of the Global South, one also encounters examples of structuring society in a way that is not familiar to our way of perceiving the world through gender binaries and via male superiority. In decolonial feminist studies, one finds various examples of alternatives to heteronormativity and heteropatriarchy.³¹ Alternative forms of representation included, for example, nongendered egalitarianism³² in the Nigerian Yoruba society, an egalitarianism that was overturned by the “invention of women”³³ in the wake of colonization. But there were also forms of gynocratic egalitarianism³⁴—for example in many Native American tribes

²⁸ Brewer, “*Baylan, Asog, Transvestism, and Sodomy*.” For a contemporary hybrid reading of those Shaman traditions in dialogue with feminist Christian perspectives by autochthonous groups in the Philippines see Agnes Brazal, “Female Image of God and Women’s Leadership in Ciudad Mistica de Dios,” *Concilium* 59, no. 1 (2018): 83–91.

²⁹ Brewer, “*Baylan, Asog, Transvestism, and Sodomy*,” 10, 13.

³⁰ Brewer, “*Baylan, Asog, Transvestism, and Sodomy*,” 6.

³¹ See, for example, Lugones, “Heterosexualism.”

³² Lugones, “Heterosexualism,” 196–198.

³³ Oyeronke Oyewumi, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

³⁴ Lugones, “Heterosexualism,” 196, 198–201.

where “the primary potency in the universe was female,”³⁵ expressed by different female spiritual powers so that “no thing is sacred . . . without [the] blessing, [the] thinking [of this female potency].”³⁶ When Christian missionaries and colonizers encountered those tribes, they took action against their conceptions of the world. “Replacing this gynocratic spiritual plurality with one supreme male being as Christianity did, was crucial in subduing the tribes.”³⁷ Different discursive and performative strategies helped the colonizers transform the “Indian tribes from egalitarian and gynocratic to hierarchical and patriarchal.”³⁸ Often native males were used as allies to transform the gender roles as they—in contrast to women of color—profited from the Western patriarchal system built on binary gender codes.³⁹

But not only gender roles differed from Western norms, sexual orientation was much more diverse in countries of the Global South as well. One can find many instances of different forms of accepted homosexual behavior—which was of course identified with different terms—for example in precolonial Africa⁴⁰ or in Native American tribes.⁴¹ The colonial encounters were a decisive force in helping to introduce homophobia, even by way of legislature.⁴² So it is through contact with Western colonizers and missionaries that the colonized’s attitudes toward

³⁵ Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* (Open Road Media, 1986), 26.

³⁶ Allen, *The Sacred Hoop*, 13.

³⁷ Lugones, “Heterosexualism,” 199.

³⁸ Lugones, “Heterosexualism,” 199.

³⁹ Lugones, “Heterosexualism,” 197; Brewer, “*Baylan, Asog*, Transvestism, and Sodomy,” 22.

⁴⁰ Sylvia Tamale, “Mythos gegen Menschenwürde,” February 11, 2015, *Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung*, www.boell.de/de/2015/02/11/mythos-gegen-menschenwuerde; Day, “Decolonial Homophobia.”

⁴¹ Lugones, “Heterosexualism,” 200.

⁴² Day, “Decolonial Homophobia,” 84, 86. “The [decolonial homophobia] argument ignores how diverse sexualities are indigenous and homophobia is colonial. . . . Previously, many societies colonized by the British tolerated or socially incorporated sexual diversity . . . No African societies have ‘singled out same-sex relations as sinful . . . except where Christianity and Islam have been adopted.” Day, “Decolonial Homophobia,” 84.

sexual orientation changed. Interestingly, the same is true for Islamic cultures and their encounters with Western forms of knowledge.⁴³

Thus, one faces a paradoxical situation when appealing to the unity of the world church in an effort to prevent a change of theological positions in regard to women, gender, and sexuality. Representations of gender and sexuality that have been discursively constructed in Western Christian societies were exported to other parts of the world during colonial times, often replacing and making invisible alternative forms of representation that were more diverse and more egalitarian. Those exported norms paradoxically come back in the present as allegedly original non-Western traditions and are used as an argument to forestall changes to the official teachings of the church about women, gender, and sexual orientation. So, efforts to redefine and describe the status of women, along with gender-diverse and LGBTQIA+ individuals, in more appropriate terms in the present are combated by importing purportedly non-Western arguments. But these very arguments are rooted in the colonial dissemination of biased Western gender representations in the past.⁴⁴ It is therefore high time to look at ethical questions concerning women, gender, and LGBTQIA+ issues in a more differentiated way in the church. This is all the more important in light of the fact that those persons still suffer discrimination—also due to colonial histories, as was shown above. Their rights are not respected in a lot of countries in the world—not only in the Global South, but also in some European countries and parts of the United States. The inhuman treatment of those persons is supported by discourse strategies of the church.

⁴³ Thomas Bauer, “Islam und ‘Homosexualität,’” in *Religion und Homosexualität*, ed. T. Bauer, B. Höcker, W. Homolka, K. Mertes, and J. Feddersen (Wallstein Verlag, 2013), 56–70.

⁴⁴ Thus, traditional gender roles and expectations concerning sexual orientation do not seem to be as unquestionable as arguments based on natural law want to make us believe.

Alternative Perspectives on and in the Church: Trying to Make Visible the Unseen

From the very beginning, the Christian faith spreading over different parts of the world has generated a tension between universality and particularity—a tension that is closely linked to the question of unity and plurality within the church, as well as with the question of normativity. When it comes to ethical questions, the tension of universality and particularity becomes even more challenging. Is it still possible to base ethics on universal norms, or are cultures too particular to find a common universal basis? Can the universal norm be anything more than an abstract principle? And how is translation between cultures possible? How does one or can one handle divergent ethical principles within the Christian community? However, with an awareness of the social constructedness of traditions and insights from post-/decolonial, feminist, and critical whiteness studies, the challenges for intercultural ethics turn out to be even more complex: How is it possible to tackle the question of power imbalances in representation processes in the church?⁴⁵ And how does a greater awareness about privileges, active ignorance, and blind spots affect ethical decision-making? The church cannot escape its complex histories of colonial entanglements. Therefore, the question of coloniality is not only intricate when it comes to understanding the identity of the church as a worldwide community, but also when ethical questions have to be dealt with and answered within society or the church.

One concrete example in which the question of unity and differences becomes particularly challenging is when the unity of the world church is used as an argument to preserve the status quo and to protect active ignorance. This has been discussed in this article by referring to the question of women in the church, of the role of gender and the status of

⁴⁵ For the problem of representation in social ethics, see Katja Winkler, “Reflexive Repräsentation. Ein postkolonialer Theoriebaustein für die theologische Sozialethik,” *Crosscultural Studies of Religion and Theology* 2, no. 1 (2023): 1–22, eplus.uni-salzburg.at/csrt/periodical/titleinfo/8625002.

the LGBTQIA+ community, and by scrutinizing the argument that the official teaching of the church regarding those topics cannot be changed, as it would privilege Western perspectives and offend non-Western parts of the church. Thus, it has been shown that the world church is used as an argument in discourse politics, which is based on a homogenizing system that essentializes and excludes certain inconvenient topics that challenge the status quo. How can these inconvenient issues, however, be represented more adequately in the official discourse of the church? Here postcolonial perspectives can be helpful as they reveal that the cultural context influences our theological knowledge and also that the various cultural contexts are part of complex entangled histories in which power is not equally distributed and which have produced excluded forms of knowledge.⁴⁶ Thus, what is necessary is a willingness to decolonize the knowledge of the church by asking new, unusual—even “unorthodox”—questions which, however, are liberating and by bringing in more diverse perspectives. This means reordering power within the church, which is never comfortable, as it implies grappling with the church’s guilt in complex, entangled histories and giving up certainties that seem all too reassuring.⁴⁷ But this is the only way of bringing to the table all the unsaid and unseen aspects of the ecclesial discourses. Only by paying attention to the privileges on which these discourses are based—privileges which produce momentous blind spots—can we make progress.

Making visible the unseen and hearing the unsaid, however, requires a willingness to deconstruct the various forms of active ignorance within the church, which is also related to the tension between universality and particularity. “When considering the task of decolonising Christian ethics, we are speaking about a particular kind of Christian ethics. The focus is on

⁴⁶ This implies reflecting upon “the way we categorize the various voices we do hear. Even if we do welcome a range of perspectives, it is still possible to place them within an imagined hierarchy of knowledge. To put it differently, we might develop a canon (whether in our own minds or on paper) of those essential voices in Christian ethics and then consider others to be optional additions. What patterns shape who we consider to be core or peripheral in our research and teaching?” Stone, “Can Christian Ethics Be Saved?,” 9.

⁴⁷ Stone, “Can Christian Ethics Be Saved?,” 10–11.

the forms of Christian ethics which feign neutrality and presume to offer universal truth. The failure to name one's own context is a refusal to acknowledge both the location and limitations of one's work."⁴⁸ An awareness of the embeddedness of the church's way of thinking and the various forms of excluded knowledge on which it rests also means scrutinizing the different official or unofficial canons and their normative implications. Such consciousness also calls for a provincializing of universal and normative claims. "Decolonising is inevitably a destabilising process, and this cannot be denied."⁴⁹ It is thus "always a violent event"⁵⁰ that challenges the epistemic violence of white Western privileges with the aim of liberation for all.⁵¹

In the long run, decolonizing knowledge structures and their performative effects in the church means that the church can no longer rely on an unquestionable certainty that the church always succeeds in guaranteeing the Christian identity. The church has to become a question for itself. It must adopt a critical awareness that the church is prone to failing in its mission to safeguard the Christian message. Thus, the church has to recognize that it can jeopardize the Christian identity by embracing an active ignorance that excludes certain forms of knowledge through what is unseen and unsaid.⁵² Even if such an alternative perspective on the church and its identity seems disturbing at first sight, it has nevertheless a basis in the tradition of the church itself. The unity of the church, which is used as an argument in ecclesial discourse politics, is one of the four *notae ecclesiae*. Although the *notae ecclesiae*—describing the church as one, holy, catholic and apostolic—are understood as identity markers of the church nowadays, their origins lie in a parenetical context—exactly because the church was aware that it is prone to fail to be one, holy, catholic and

⁴⁸ Stone, "Can Christian Ethics Be Saved?," 9.

⁴⁹ Stone, "Can Christian Ethics Be Saved?," 9.

⁵⁰ Stone, "Can Christian Ethics Be Saved?," 9 referring to Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Wilcox (Grove Press, 2007).

⁵¹ Stone, "Can Christian Ethics Be Saved?," 16–18.

⁵² Rettenbacher, "Worüber man nicht spricht;" Rettenbacher, "Zerbrochene Gewissheiten."

apostolic.⁵³ So the *notae ecclesiae*, or marks of the church, can also be read through their unseen and unsaid excluded knowledge and active ignorance. Unity can obscure factual plurality and differences, the attribute of holiness can fail to be honest about the reality of guilt within the church, catholicity is prone to not being able to communicate and translate the message of the church to all contexts, and apostolicity can ignore the excluded non-male and non-heteronormative pillars of the church that have been expelled from the male-written tradition.

So, it is exactly the *notae ecclesiae* that—far from reassuring Christian identity—lead to the question of the unseen and unsaid at the center of the Christian tradition, its norms and forms of knowledge. An awareness of the unseen, therefore, compels the church to seek all the excluded forms of knowledge that have not fit into the socially constructed, male-written tradition based on certain privileges and on active ignorance. A perspective on the church that is inspired by insights from feminist, post-/decolonial, and critical whiteness studies will pay attention to all the processes of homogenization, reification, universalization, and othering that help to cultivate an attitude of active ignorance by concealing alternative perspectives and forms of knowledge and by silencing other voices.

This silencing of alternative voices points to another dimension of the church tradition that has been excluded and lost over time: The Christian virtue of *parrhesia*—the attitude of naming things openly and freely, as well as speaking up bravely in order to grow together in the community of the church—has been eradicated from the discursive and performative identity constructions of the church.⁵⁴ The lost virtue of *parrhesia* goes hand in hand with the suppression of the insight that the church is a limited reality. It is a limited reality both in time—in the sense that from

⁵³ Sigrid Rettenbacher, “Endlich endlich? Vom Überleben der Kirche im Anerkennen ihrer eigenen Endlichkeit,” in *Endlich! Leben und Überleben*, ed. G. M. Hoff (Tyrolia, 2010), 160–192; 177–180.

⁵⁴ Stephan Goertz, “Parrhesia. Über den ‘Mut zur Wahrheit’ (M. Foucault) in der Moraltheologie,” in *Verantwortung und Integrität heute. Theologische Ethik unter dem Anspruch der Redlichkeit*, ed. J. Sautermeister (Herder, 2013), 70–86; Rettenbacher, “Worüber man nicht spricht.”

an eschatological perspective, the church works on its own extinction and will not be necessary as a sign at the end of time anymore—as well as a limited reality in terms of insight and knowledge.

The awareness of silenced voices and excluded knowledge brings us back to the first witnesses of the resurrected Christ referred to at the beginning of this chapter and their capability to see the so far unseen. When one takes seriously the insights from feminist, post-/decolonial, and critical whiteness studies for an alternative understanding of the church and doing ethics in an intercultural way, one can read Jesus' promise to Thomas, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (John 20:29), in a different way that pays attention to the unseen, with all its traumas and vulnerability. This quote is sometimes read as endorsing a blind trust in the church without questioning its identity constructions and forms of knowledge, but "those who have not seen and yet have believed" can also be read in an alternative sense: Believing in the unseen and unsaid—that is, having the capability to see and trust in the relevance of the unseen and silenced aspects in the tradition of the church—can be a blessing. It is a promising resource for better understanding the Good News of the Christian message, which is based on the promise of a good life for all, and not on the active ignorance of some privileged individuals living at the expense of excluded others. Even if the wounds and traumas of exclusion and marginalization are unseen or not yet seen in mainstream theological discourses, believing in their existence makes possible a new way of seeing—a shift in perspective that unveils a new life that truly makes possible the liberation of all.⁵⁵ Thus, giving up certainties within the church can lead to a paschal hope that makes possible a new future, opening our eyes to the so far unseen and unperceived.



⁵⁵ Sigrid Rettenbacher, "‘There is a crack in everything, that’s how the light gets in.’ Kirchlichkeit des Religionsunterrichts und post-/dekoloniale Perspektiven – eine Erprobung," *Handbuch der Religionen* 85 (2025): 1–23, westarp.de/themenseite/there-is-a-crack-in-everything/.

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9. The Role of Gender in Intercultural Ethics

Mirijam Salfinger

Theological ethics discusses how we can live a fulfilling and responsible life from the perspective of Christian faith. It seeks to find answers to existential and societal challenges in dialogue with the arts and humanities as well as with the social and natural sciences. This includes questions about marriage, family, and sexual morality, as well as different understandings of gender roles and relations.

Even though these questions are primarily addressed in the field of ethics of gender relations, gender and the understanding of gender roles also play a significant role in nearly all other areas of theological ethics. This includes areas such as reproductive ethics and the emerging field of care ethics, and gender is also central to the history of moral theology and theological anthropology. Finally, and of particular relevance to this volume, gender is relevant to intercultural theological ethics, where not only the question of intercultural ethics itself but also all other areas of theological ethics can become subjects of discussion.

Theological and ethical approaches are shaped by the socio-cultural environment, as well as by the individual experiences and worldviews of those who produce them. Like all people, theologians and ethicists are socialized to distinguish between at least two different genders. Beyond this basic distinction, however, they may have very different understandings of gender and gender roles. Such understandings, informed by the norms and ideas of their theological context, also influence the theology and ethics they practice in their professional contexts—sometimes more, sometimes less. They are part of their anthropological framework. Gender affects not only topics of theological ethics but belongs to its very foundation. For this reason, it is crucial in the field of intercultural theological ethics to reflect on and become aware of

how gender shapes our anthropological framework, which in turn shapes our approach to questions of ethical importance.

Gender is not only a crucial aspect of identity but also a pervasive structural factor in discrimination. Forms of discrimination based on race, origin, age, disability, or gender significantly limit the realization of successful and happy lives. Multi-layered expressions of and ideas about gender and gender roles vary depending on community dynamics and socio-cultural environment. Socio-cultural context thus plays a decisive role in the formation of gender. In order to reckon with and deconstruct structures of discrimination based on gender—a task that contributes to a successful life—it is essential to deal with differing conceptions of gender.

The complexity and problematic nature of this topic as it relates to intercultural theological ethics becomes clear not only from individual examples, but also on a structural level, since gender and gender roles are interpreted differently depending on broader contexts and cultures. Interestingly, these different interpretations are underpinned by the same biblical texts and religious norms. The problems related to gender are not confined to any isolated culture; rather, they are all-pervasive, influenced by religious, social, and other local cultural settings.

This complexity has generated virulent conflicts, necessitating an account of intercultural theological ethics that can help adjudicate disputes and scrutinize various forms of gender discrimination. The challenge for intercultural theological ethics in relation to gender is to address gender-related issues in different cultural contexts and spur intercultural communication aimed at the promulgation of human rights and human dignity.

The aim of this chapter is to address tensions that result from competing accounts of gender by developing a form of intercultural theological ethics that is alert to the nuances and complexity of the debate. The first section deals with the significance of gender within theological ethics. This is followed by a discussion of its particular relevance for intercultural theological ethics. Finally, the third section discusses the

necessary and sufficient conditions of a gender-sensitive intercultural theological ethics.

The Role of Gender in Theological Ethics

The importance of the topic of gender for theological ethics was emphasized in the first *Jahrbuch für Moralthologie* (Yearbook of Moral Theology), which was published in 2017 under the title *Gender—Herausforderungen für die Christliche Ethik* (“Gender—Challenges for Christian Ethics”) by the German moral theologians Katharina Klöckner, Thomas Laubach, and Jochen Sautermeister. At the beginning of the anthology, they highlight the stakes of discussion: “Especially in moral theology, gender is a cross-sectional concept with explosive power, because the foundations of moral-theological reflection must be reformulated if one takes seriously the questions and problems that the gender discourses pose.”¹ Referencing the moral theologian Regina Ammicht Quinn, they observe that theological discourse has long concerned itself with gender categories, but in a way that is precarious.² Gender is a morally charged concept that is relevant to every stage of human life, and so moral theology must treat it as a dynamic and changing concept. Insofar as the questions and problems raised by gender are taken seriously, the foundations of moral reflection must be reorganized.³

In this regard, the moral theologian Konrad Hilpert writes that “the postulate of gender sensitivity must be considered an indispensable dimension of normative-ethical reflection”⁴ for Christian ethicists in the

¹ Katharina Klöcker, Thomas Laubach, and Jochen Sautermeister, “Prekäre Verhältnisse: Zur Beziehung von Moralthologie und Genderdiskurs,” in *Gender—Herausforderung für die christliche Ethik*, ed. K. Klöcker, T. Laubach, and J. Sautermeister (Herder, 2017), 7. All translations from German and Spanish into English are my own.

² Klöcker, Laubach, and Sautermeister, “Prekäre Verhältnisse,” 7; R. Ammicht Quinn, “Gefährliches Denken: Gender und Theologie,” *Concilium* 48 (2012): 363.

³ Klöcker, Laubach, and Sautermeister, “Prekäre Verhältnisse,” 7, 9.

⁴ Konrad Hilpert, “Gerechtigkeitsrelevante Kategorie oder Ideologie? Die aktuelle Debatte um das Genderkonzept in Kirche und Theologie,” in *Gender—Herausforderung für die christliche Ethik*,

future. In the first instance, the task of gender-sensitive theological ethics is therefore to incorporate the female perspective on all questions of ethics, which for a long time was primarily dealt with from the perspective of celibate men. Furthermore, theological ethics must uncover gender-related social injustices in the form of discrimination—the disadvantages and outright exclusion of groups of people who do not correspond to traditional gender norms. Ultimately, this entails reflecting on and reformulating classic topics of theological anthropology and ethics.⁵ Viewing the practical challenges that arise for theological ethics, Hilpert emphasizes the importance of the “cultural-social embeddedness and dynamics of gender relations.”⁶ It is precisely this cultural dimension that demonstrates the importance of gender to human existence—for moral theology in general, and for intercultural theological ethics in particular.

The social ethicist Marianne Heimbach-Steins goes even further by pointing out that there is no gender-neutral reality. Rather, gender serves as a structuring element of interpersonal relationships and coexistence. However, it is not so much the biological dimension that is important, but the socio-cultural dimension and the associated social expectations. As patterns of social order, these and the associated norms are subject to cultural and historical change.⁷ This illustrates the need to continually pose and reflect on the question of gender within theological ethics.

To this end, Heimbach-Steins argues that (growing) gender awareness should be interpreted as a “sign of the times,” understood in the sense articulated at the Second Vatican Council. This awareness is “today an important factor worldwide for the perception of social injustice and the interpretation of human experiences and changes in standards of justice.”⁸

ed. Katharina Klöcker, Thomas Laubach, and Jochen Sautermeister, *Jahrbuch für Moraltheologie* 1 (Herder, 2017), 15.

⁵ Hilpert, “Gerechtigkeitsrelevante Kategorie,” 25, 26.

⁶ Hilpert, “Gerechtigkeitsrelevante Kategorie,” 34.

⁷ Marianne Heimbach-Steins, “Die Gender-Debatte. Herausforderungen für Theologie und Kirche,” in *Gender studieren: Lernprozess für Theologie und Kirche*, ed. M. Eckholt (Matthias Grünewald Verlag, 2017), 39–41.

⁸ Heimbach-Steins, “Die Gender-Debatte,” 50.

In theological-anthropological inquiry, the examination of gender significantly affects ethics. This is because it is essentially about “recognizing the autonomy of subjects, who are always also gendered, as actors in their own (life) history.”⁹ If theological ethics wants to offer meaningful moral orientation, it must be open to the diversity of human experience, pursuing theological-ethical reflection in interdisciplinary dialogue with the social sciences, among other disciplines, and include these as a source and critical counterpart. Heimbach-Steins thus shows that the category of gender is indispensable for the project of theological ethics, enabling it to reflect on the question of the good life and to develop moral orientation.¹⁰

The function of gender also varies depending on its application. The moral theologian Regina Ammicht-Quinn distinguishes three interlinked functions: Firstly, gender is a category of analysis that examines “grammars” of gender relations and reveals structures of inequality or power. This necessarily means turning away from essentialist concepts of gender, which assume the supernatural and timelessly determined natures of “woman” and “man.”¹¹ Furthermore, gender generates insecurity, as it is precisely these fixed essentialist gender concepts (and their supposed stability) that are abandoned. Gender thus functions as a source of uncertainty, and it is this very uncertainty that questions and breaks up structures of discrimination and violence and triggers new learning processes. Ultimately, gender is a category of justice that aims to end exclusion, exploitation, and discrimination. The aim is to do justice to people in their diversity and to strive for justice for all.¹² “Theological ethics is faced with the task of

⁹ Heimbach-Steins, “Die Gender-Debatte,” 52.

¹⁰ Heimbach-Steins, “Die Gender-Debatte,” 50–52.

¹¹ The anti-gender discourse will not be discussed in this chapter; for a critical discussion of “gender ideology,” see Gerhard Marschütz, *Gender-Ideologie!?: Eine katholische Kritik* (Echter, 2023); as well as Gerhard Marschütz, “Surprisingly Bad: Theological Notes on Catholic Gender Critique,” in *Towards Just Gender Relations: Rethinking the Role of Women in Church and Society*, ed. G. Prüller-Jagenteufel et al., *RaT* 13; Brill, 2019), 199–214, doi-org.uaccess.univie.ac.at/10.14220/9783737009850.199.

¹² Regina Ammicht Quinn, “Gender. Zur ‘Grammatik’ der Geschlechterverhältnisse,” in *Gender studieren: Lernprozess für Theologie und Kirche*, ed. Margit Eckholt (Matthias Grünewald Verlag, 2017), 36–38.

reactively developing criteria for assessing gender relations and gender roles on the one hand, and actively promoting the necessary changes in this area on the other.”¹³ The fundamental ethical criterion must be the rejection of oppressive structures.¹⁴

As Ammicht-Quinn points out, ethical reference systems and categories, both in the theological-ethical sphere and in the secular sphere, are gendered. For example, Thomas Aquinas, who has had an enormous influence on Christian ethics, saw the female gender as deficient and therefore subordinate to the male gender.¹⁵ This prejudice can also be found in Immanuel Kant, according to whom the moral tends to be masculine and the immoral tends to be feminine. And for Sigmund Freud, too, morality clearly has a gender, namely the male gender. Women, on the other hand, are not in a position to behave morally due to their biological disposition. The marginalization and undervaluation of women in moral discourse, along with the devaluation of their ethical competence, permeate the history of modern ethics. While in classical philosophy, rationality and reason were assigned to the male sphere, emotionality, lust, desire, and ultimately sin—partly due to the influence of the Christian narrative of the Fall—were connoted as feminine. The distinction between dualisms such as culture and nature, mind and body, reason and emotion, and order and chaos dates back to Greek philosophy and is neither gender-neutral nor value-free. In modern times, these dichotomies were ultimately also associated with the allocation of public and private space, among other things. While women are assigned to the private and domestic sphere, the public sphere is reserved for men. This allocation and division into hierarchical dualisms not only resulted in the subordination of women to men, but also meant that women were not regarded as ethical subjects. This conception of womanhood, which can still be found today in

¹³ Regina Ammicht Quinn, “Ética teológica y perspectiva de género,” in *Justicia para las mujeres: Desafíos actuales de la ética teológica feminista*, ed. G. Di Renzo, E. Ortíz de Elguea, and P. Carman (Editorial Universidad Católica de Córdoba, 2024), 228.

¹⁴ Ammicht Quinn, “Ética teológica y perspectiva de género,” 228.

¹⁵ Marschütz, *Gender-Ideologie!?*, 103.

magisterial texts and papal speeches on the nature of women,¹⁶ influenced how women were perceived by others and how they viewed themselves, with far-reaching consequences.

This bias also affected the ethical evaluation of male and female actions, as Lawrence Kohlberg's developmental model shows. The psychologist Carol Gilligan, for example, noted girls did not reach the highest levels of the model, but this does not mean that girls are morally inferior to boys; rather, it merely showed that girls made ethical decisions based on other factors due to their socialization.¹⁷ Although Gilligan made this connection back in the 1990s, the distinction between female and male morality still has an impact today. For example, Kohlberg's developmental system is still taught and studied in schools and universities today. The supposed distinction between "male" and "female" characteristics continues to shape Christian theological anthropology and is still deployed by the Church's Magisterium. This approach shows that gender as a category of analysis is not only relevant to narrow questions of womanhood or femininity, but also to the entire field of theological ethics. Ammicht-Quinn argues that the mere integration of the "women's question" is not enough; instead, a fundamental change in the structure of theological ethics is needed. Such developments are already becoming apparent in some areas of ethics: Thus, concepts such as friendship, relationships, and caring for others are now viewed as central objects of ethical analysis, complementing more traditional methods of moral evaluation, like making abstract and rational judgments about discrete acts. However, the revaluation of relationship-oriented structures in ethics should by no means be understood as a confirmation of gender-specific distinctions and attributions. Rather, it constitutes a fundamental change

¹⁶ Lisa Sowle Cahill, "Justicia," in *Justicia para las mujeres: Desafíos actuales de la ética teológica feminista*, ed. G. Di Renzo, E. Ortíz de Elguea, and P. Carman (Editorial Universidad Católica de Córdoba, 2024), 50–52; see also Marschütz, *Gender-Ideologie!?*, 17–58.

¹⁷ Ammicht Quinn, "Ética teológica y perspectiva de género," 215–221; also Cahill, "Justicia," 48–49.

in the ethical perspective, one focused on people and living together, and aimed at overcoming the gender-based division of labor within society.¹⁸

This structural change is not only relevant to gender equality, but also to intercultural ethics. The influence of hieratic dualisms in Western Eurocentric ethics not only led to the degradation of female morality, but also to the dismissal of moral and cultural systems that were based more on emotionality, solidarity, and community. This served to justify colonial and missionary endeavors, and also led to the devaluation of other cultures and cultural hegemony. Particularly in the field of intercultural ethics, it is necessary to look at theological categories and reference systems from a gender-critical perspective. Although universal norms are assumed within Roman Catholic moral theology, the different values and frames of reference with which these are associated are subject to the cultural influence, and this includes the Church's understanding of gender.

Intercultural Theological Ethics and Gender

The heightened role of gender in the field of theological ethics is reinforced in the field of intercultural theological ethics. Gender and gender concepts are always embedded in and constructed by a given socio-cultural context, and even the question of a person's sex cannot be answered beyond this context, since sex itself is affected by socio-cultural interpretation. As the philosopher Judith Butler points out, one can make no pre-discursive inference about a person's body and thus their sex, because "there is no reference to a pure body which is not at the same time a further formation of that body."¹⁹ This shows the importance of cultural and social contexts for the questions and problems surrounding gender (and by extension gender equality). Due to socio-cultural embedding, it is not possible to analyze and reflect on gender in a universal and generally valid way. In the

¹⁸ Ammicht Quinn, "Ética teológica y perspectiva de género," 222–223.

¹⁹ Judith Butler, "Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex,'" in *Understanding Inequality: The Intersection of Race/Ethnicity, Class, and Gender*, ed. B. A. Arrighi (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007), 148–149.

field of intercultural theological ethics, it is therefore necessary to deal with gender and different gender concepts with reference to distinct social and cultural contexts.

Patriarchal social structures and gender inequality are underpinned by cultures that use symbolic, affective, and aesthetic means to reinforce customs, behaviors, and institutions.²⁰ According to ethicist Lisa Cahill, justice, especially in relation to gender justice, is more than the pursuit of an end state based on a set of criteria; rather, it requires the dynamic development of cultures, social practices, and structures that leads to greater dignity and equality for all people of all genders and thus to greater participation in the common good.²¹ Cahill emphasizes that gender roles and the associated social perceptions are deeply interwoven in cultural and religious practices, traditions, and views. She also points out that cultural and religious traditions tend to adopt the rhetoric of equality in order to reinforce de facto inequality.²² This is precisely why a careful examination of these traditions within the framework of (theological) ethics is necessary. Establishing gender equality and ending discrimination on the basis of gender or sexual orientation must therefore always be negotiated with reference to socio-cultural contexts.

In this respect, the ethicist Angelika Walser emphasizes the elementary role of gender as a category within intercultural theological ethics and states that there is no way around gender justice as a transcultural necessity in the twenty-first century, even if this universally formulated claim is negotiated differently in different contexts and cultures. The question of equal opportunities for participation and self-determination must also be dealt with more intensively, especially in intercultural and interreligious ethics.²³ Finally, Walser emphasizes that engaging with gender and intersectionality opens and expands ethical discourse, which is particularly necessary in an

²⁰ Cahill, "Justicia," 49.

²¹ Cahill, "Justicia," 39–40.

²² Cahill, "Justicia," 49–52.

²³ Angelika Walser, "Mehr 'Gender' statt weniger! Ein Plädoyer für die verstärkte Auseinandersetzung mit der Kategorie 'Gender' in der Theologie," in *geschlecht transkulturell: Aktuelle Forschungsperspektiven*, ed. Eva Hausbacher, Liesa Herbst, Julia Ostwald, and Martina Thiele (Springer, 2020), 66–67.

intercultural setting.²⁴

Requirements for a Gender-Sensitive Intercultural Theological Ethics

The following section sets out three requirements for gender-sensitive intercultural theological ethics. These include the paradigm shift towards an inclusive, holistic, realistic, and multidimensional anthropology such as the application of intersectionality, decolonialization, and postcoloniality. In a final step, it is shown that these very requirements are necessary for doing justice to people as individuals.

An Inclusive, Holistic, Realistic and Multidimensional Anthropology

The role of gender in intercultural ethics requires reflection on our underlying anthropological framework. This approach must be open enough to accommodate the plurality and heterogeneity of different conceptions of gender and gender roles. Since adherence to a naturalistic-essentialist anthropology excludes marginalized groups—and indeed enables further discrimination against them²⁵—such an account of humanity cannot be used as the basis for theological-ethical reflection. It is also necessary to overcome hierarchical dualisms, which have already been discussed. The Brazilian ecofeminist and theologian Ivone Gebara calls for a transformation of anthropology.²⁶ We need to move “from an idealistic

²⁴ Walser, “Mehr ‘Gender’ statt weniger,” 68.

²⁵ For a critique of the essentialist natural law paradigm, see Marschütz, *Gender-Ideologie!?*, 45–47, 108, 235.

²⁶ The following considerations are based on Ivone Gebara and Maria Clara Lucchetti Bingemer, *Mary, Mother of God, Mother of the Poor* (OV: *Maria, Mãe de Deus e mãe dos pobres*), trans. Phillip Berryman (Wipf & Stock, 2004). For a more detailed discussion on the topic of anthropology by Gebara see Ivone Gebara, *Ensayo de antropología filosófica. El arte de mezclar conceptos y plantar desconceptos* (Verbo Divino, 2021).

to a realistic, from a dualistic to a holistic, from a one-dimensional to a multidimensional and from an androcentric to an inclusive anthropology.”²⁷

From an Androcentric to an Inclusive Anthropology

Christian anthropology, insofar as it is characterized by patriarchal structures, has proven to be androcentric. According to St. Paul, for example, women were not created in the image of God in the full sense, as men were, but only in a limited way and indirectly through him (1 Cor 11:7–8). And Thomas Aquinas assumed the inferiority of women, whom he regarded as imperfect when compared to men (ST I, q. 92, a. 1; q. 92, a. 2; q. 98, a. 2; PL VIII, I, 3).²⁸ Following this line of argument, the male human being was seen as “the” mediator between God and humanity. As has already been shown, this had (and still has) a massive impact on theology, and above all on theological ethics. As Gebara and Bingemer observe, “A human-centered anthropology seeks to grasp the revelation of the divine all throughout the human and accepts the historical and theological consequences of this stance.”²⁹ This choice necessarily leads to a revision of the androcentric cultural schemata. The aim is to emphasize the value of every human being in their autonomy and uniqueness.³⁰ Furthermore, an inclusive and holistic anthropology that assumes male and female as two poles of a spectrum, with different variants in between, is not only able to overcome the subordination of women, but also break through the strict male-female dualism. Understood in this way, theological ethics does justice to current findings from the natural and social sciences, and is thus able to enter into interdisciplinary dialogue, contributing to non-religious ethics and philosophies, instead of being disregarded as unscientific. Ultimately, theological ethics will also do justice to the

²⁷ Ivone Gebara, “I feel myself like someone who loves to drink from different waters,” interview by Missionswissenschaftliches Institut Missio e.V., in *Jahrbuch für kontextuelle Theologie* 7 (LIT, 1999), 20.

²⁸ Marschütz, *Gender-Ideologie!*, 102–103.

²⁹ Gebara and Bingemer, *Mary, Mother of God*, 4.

³⁰ Gebara and Bingemer, *Mary, Mother of God*, 3–5.

realities of life and experiences of those who do not identify as clearly male or female—that is, who identify as trans or inter.³¹

From a Dualistic to a Holistic Anthropology

The juxtaposition of spirit and matter that characterizes Christian theology comes through the influence of Greek philosophy. Overcoming this dualism and thus the inherent hostility towards the body has by no means been achieved. “On the one hand,” Gebara and Bingemer write, “unifying anthropology strives to overcome this dualism by affirming the deep unity of the human being, who is both material and spiritual, inseparably material and spiritual, so much so that we cannot conceive of the human being except on the basis of this reality which is proper to humans.”³² Thus, the spiritual constitution is only perceptible within the boundaries of materiality. Gebara and Bingemer further emphasize the necessity of understanding this reality within the boundaries of historical materiality.³³

This means the revaluation of physicality and the human in their entirety. This is also associated with overcoming the dichotomy between reason and emotionality, which is often coded in terms of gender. By perceiving the unity of human existence and taking it seriously, a theological ethics based on a holistic anthropology is not only able to connect the reality of life and the existential experiences of people with each other, but also to appreciate their creatureliness.

From an Idealistic to a Realistic Anthropology

An idealistic anthropology, in contrast to a realistic anthropology, is not based on human reality, but refers to an ideal beyond history. Unlike the

³¹ This is particularly relevant with regard to intercultural theological ethics, insofar as some non-Western cultures recognize a third gender.

³² Gebara and Bingemer, *Mary, Mother of God*, 5.

³³ Gebara and Bingemer, *Mary, Mother of God*, 6.

conflict-ridden reality in which we live, the ideal seems to be “beautiful, harmonious, perfect.”³⁴ According to Gebara and Bingemer, such idealization impairs our image of reality and the world, leading to a dependence on the projected or desired world, as well as a simultaneous rejection of reality in its ugliness and beauty, in its dirtiness and purity. Human reality, which is neither dualistic nor perfect, is denied in its ambivalence and complexity. Striving for an exaggerated ideal simultaneously leads to a fear of failure and a refusal to face reality. Our aspirations should therefore not be oriented towards a perfect person and an unattainable catalogue of virtues and values, but towards the realization and preservation of the common good.³⁵ In this sense, striving for a “better” world and a good life for all is fundamentally different from striving for an unattainable ideal. In this sense, Gebara and Bingemer point out that such an idealistic anthropology prevents theology from accessing history as a place of incarnation. Theology, however, must enter into a concrete relationship with real people situated in a time, space, and culture. This is of particular relevance to intercultural theological ethics, since it must legitimize and acknowledge respective cultural and historical locations. Different cultures could thus enrich each other in the “continuous/discontinuous flow of history”³⁶ and work together despite their differences.³⁷

In this sense, the aim of a realist anthropology is not to state objective truths, but to recognize and accept the interweaving of subjectivity and objectivity. This does not mean a rejection of facts delivered by natural science—on the contrary, (natural) science is valued and included as part of reality—but facts never exist without interpretation. They are always embedded, and their meaning is derived precisely from this.³⁸ A realistic theological anthropology thus makes it possible not only to connect with

³⁴ Gebara and Bingemer, *Mary, Mother of God*, 7.

³⁵ Gebara and Bingemer, *Mary, Mother of God*, 7–8.

³⁶ Gebara and Bingemer, *Mary, Mother of God*, 9.

³⁷ Gebara and Bingemer, *Mary, Mother of God*, 8–9.

³⁸ Gebara and Bingemer, *Mary, Mother of God*, 9.

natural science, but also to take socio-cultural embeddedness of its findings seriously. Especially with regard to gender issues, this is urgently necessary, as shown above in connection to Judith Butler.

From a One-Dimensional to a Multidimensional Anthropology

Complementing their criticism of an idealization of human existence, Gebara and Bingemer also point to the multidimensionality of existence. A one-dimensional anthropology defines the human ideal on the basis of a clear set of attributes and characteristics. This clear demarcation leads to a closed definition of the human and is an “expression of essentialist idealism.”³⁹ Although a one-dimensional anthropology provides a stable definition, the rigid demarcation leads to “moral rigidity.”⁴⁰ Anything that deviates from essentialist ideas is regarded as unacceptable and judged as wrong or bad. Within such a theological anthropology, the androcentric view of man is defined as reflecting the will of God. Any criticism or statement to the contrary is judged and condemned as non-acceptance or a violation of the Creator’s will. Gebara and Bingemer show that this anthropological orientation is opposed to gender justice and therefore also to gender-sensitive theology and theological ethics.⁴¹

In contrast, they refer to the multidimensionality of human existence, which is characterized by development and unites “the animal, the vegetable, the mineral, the spiritual, the divine. They also contain good and evil, love and hatred, peace and violence, not as mutually exclusive but in a mixture that includes all these ‘ingredients.’”⁴² A multidimensional anthropology therefore enables theology to integrate the complementary aspects of human existence in a holistic way. Gebara and Bingemer finally argue, “Human beings are not first good and then corrupted, nor first corrupted and then saved, but rather humans are this whole complex

³⁹ Gebara and Bingemer, *Mary, Mother of God*, 10.

⁴⁰ Gebara and Bingemer, *Mary, Mother of God*, 10.

⁴¹ Gebara and Bingemer, *Mary, Mother of God*, 10.

⁴² Gebara and Bingemer, *Mary, Mother of God*, 11.

reality striving to explain themselves and to explain the world in an existence marked by internal division and marked by the nature of their being, which is conflictive and simultaneously limited and unlimited.”⁴³ They understand this complex reality and multidimensionality as an inexhaustible miracle that becomes accessible to us when we accept the mystery of our multiplicity. In contrast to the devaluation of the other, diversity is thus valued and understood as part of creation. However, this refers not only to individual uniqueness but also to cultural diversity.⁴⁴ A multidimensional anthropology as a frame of reference for intercultural theological ethics thus aims at the unconditional acceptance of every human being—with all their fractures and contradictions, with all their individual desires and dispositions—as well as the appreciation and acceptance of cultural diversity. Oriented towards and embedded in the common good, this approach is beneficial for intercultural theological ethics, posing the question of what constitutes a happy life for all people.

Intersectionality

When considering concrete questions about how to responsibly and successfully shape the lives of individuals in a community, the intersectional approach proves indispensable. In our globalized world, intercultural ethics requires a nuanced understanding of how gender intersects with other dimensions of identity, such as race, ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation. Intersectionality is key to addressing the complex ethical issues that arise in diverse cultural contexts. For instance, the experiences of women from different cultural backgrounds or marginalized groups within the Church may differ significantly, necessitating tailored ethical approaches. Topics concerning gender and gender roles within intercultural ethics cannot be addressed without considering their broader context.

⁴³ Gebara and Bingemer, *Mary, Mother of God*, 11.

⁴⁴ Gebara and Bingemer, *Mary, Mother of God*, 11.

In this respect, the moral theologian and psychologist Gabriela Maria di Renzo emphasizes the special significance of the concept of intersectionality for theological ethics. Intersectionality is a justice-oriented approach and for this reason it makes important contributions to theological ethics: it promotes “moral reasoning that assumes a subject assembled by multiple axes of inequalities, raising awareness about the need to analyze one’s own positions of power or privilege and consider the voices and experiences of those who are actively involved.”⁴⁵

By redefining the subject with an intersectional approach, it becomes possible to account for the complexity of human experience. Theological ethics must recognize this complexity, and in fact it should serve as the foundation of its theoretical framework. Therefore, theological ethics must constantly strive to recognize the uniqueness of all dimensions of human experience, and above all to understand the contexts in which these experiences occur. As di Renzo writes, “This process leads to a more complete understanding of the human person and therefore to a more solid and just elaboration of ethical judgments, whether corrective or as a starting point for ethical reflection.”⁴⁶

Di Renzo concludes that it is fundamental for ethicists to start from a subject who is “constituted by several axes of fluid, multilayered, changing and also contradictory inequalities through which people experience the world.”⁴⁷ This is the only way to engage with the human experience more inclusively and equitably. In particular, the experience of marginalized people is taken into account, which is often not regarded as noteworthy in theology.⁴⁸ As long as the different factors of discrimination and marginalization are considered separately, the complex reality of these people’s lives cannot be adequately addressed.

⁴⁵ di Renzo, “Interseccionalidad: Aportes a la ética teológica,” *Estudios Eclesiásticos: Revista de investigación e información teológica y canónica* 98, no. 386 (2023): 444, doi.org/10.14422/ee.v98.i386.y2023.001.

⁴⁶ di Renzo, “Interseccionalidad: Aportes a la ética teológica,” 456.

⁴⁷ di Renzo, “Interseccionalidad: Aportes a la ética teológica,” 456.

⁴⁸ di Renzo, “Interseccionalidad: Aportes a la ética teológica,” 456.

In this respect, intersectionality as a theory and method is geared towards justice and is therefore of fundamental importance, especially for theological ethics, insofar as it has the task of denouncing all structures of power and privilege that continue to marginalize, oppress, and subordinate people and to counter them with a path to justice.⁴⁹

Decolonization and Postcolonialism

The deep connection between the Christian religion and coloniality has had a major impact on perceptions of gender and has reinforced a global patriarchal order. As the political scientists Nikita Dhawan and María do Mar Castro Varela point out, Christianity, through its representatives, played a significant and powerful role in the justification of colonialism, enormously influencing colonial societies. “The seemingly unstoppable Christian will to bring God’s universal grace, order and reason to the colonial territories also plays an important role in justifying Western colonialism,” Castro Varela and Dhawan observe.⁵⁰ They go on to state that, “Although the colonies were first and foremost places of economic exploitation, they were also the target of the civilizing mission, which aimed to create a reformed, colonial subject that would experience European intervention as a liberating process.”⁵¹ Christianity as the religion of the oppressed was ultimately misused by colonial acolytes as a powerful instrument of oppression.⁵² For example, religion played an important role in constructions of masculinity for both the colonizers and the colonized.⁵³

Ecofeminist approaches, among others, show that the perpetuation and justification of the oppressive gender order is closely linked to the oppression and exploitation of people subject to colonial rule. It is also

⁴⁹ di Renzo, “Interseccionalidad: Aportes a la ética teológica,” 459.

⁵⁰ María do Mar Castro Varela and Nikita Dhawan, *Postkoloniale Theorie: Eine kritische Einführung*, 3rd ed. (transcript Verlag; UTB, 2020), 80.

⁵¹ Castro Varela and Dhawan, *Postkoloniale Theorie*, 62.

⁵² Castro Varela and Dhawan, *Postkoloniale Theorie*, 78.

⁵³ Castro Varela and Dhawan, *Postkoloniale Theorie*, 80.

connected to the ongoing exploitation of nature. The hierarchical dualisms that were deeply rooted in the Western tradition of thought and thus also in Christian philosophy and theology, and to a certain extent still are, served to legitimize this worldview. The interconnectedness of these structures therefore requires not only an intersectional approach but also a de-/postcolonial one, enabling us to critically question the oppressive and discriminatory structures of our own Christian tradition. The task of critically examining one's own tradition and role in oppression is especially important for Europeans working in intercultural ethics, since the very goal of intercultural ethics is to overcome Eurocentrism and other forms of national or ethnic supremacy.

Within theological ethics, the connection between gender and coloniality is particularly evident within the realm of sexual ethics. For example, in her book *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics*, ethicist Margaret Farley argues for the importance of incorporating intercultural perspectives into Western-style sexual ethics. Western cultural experiences should not be absolutized as human experiences simpliciter. Although she points out the danger of "ethical relativism and of the overwhelming determination of moral norms by historical and cultural contingencies,"⁵⁴ differences should be accepted.⁵⁵ For example, the assessment of non-Western traditions and practices through a Western lens is often neither accurate nor appropriate; it is also characterized by the supposed division between "progressive" and "undeveloped" cultures.⁵⁶ In this respect, Farley emphasizes the important role of sexuality in colonialism: "The more distant and different peoples appeared to their visitors and colonizers, the more were their 'native' bodies sexualized, eroticized, in racially charged fields."⁵⁷ De-/postcolonial, and especially feminist, research has begun to spotlight the epistemic violence inflicted on non-Western cultures by Western conquerors and settlers. This form

⁵⁴ Margaret A. Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (Continuum, 2010), 62.

⁵⁵ Farley, *Just Love*, 58.

⁵⁶ Farley, *Just Love*, 43.

⁵⁷ Farley, *Just Love*, 66.

of violence aimed to fundamentally change the reality of life and the self-image of the affected societies by imposing Western ways of thinking. The sexualization was particularly evident in depictions of female bodies. Indigenous women were seen above all as fertile, unrestrained, resilient, and wild. Because of these characteristics, they were not only employed as domestic servants, but also sexually abused. However, as they were seen as hypersexual, this was not considered abuse. White women, on the other hand, “became models of European domesticity and restrained sexuality”⁵⁸ who had to be protected from the supposed depravity of the indigenous population. For Christian missionaries, controlling indigenous sexuality was the pretense used to “civilize” indigenous people, protecting them from themselves.⁵⁹

Although most former colonies have now achieved at least formal political independence, colonialism has by no means been overcome and continues to determine interactions between cultures and societies. Western ideas of progress and modernity, and also of morality and sexuality, continue to determine the global discourse and forms of (neo-)colonial power relations persist due to political and economic dependencies.⁶⁰ These realities point to the need for a high degree of sensitivity within intercultural theological ethics, especially when it comes to gender and sexuality. As Farley writes, “Every effort to understand ourselves and others, therefore, requires that we challenge the legacies of previous interpreters, probe our own biases, critique our place in the historical dynamics of power and knowledge, and identify the categories that lead to error and to harm.”⁶¹

Doing Justice to People as Individuals

Gender plays an essential role in intercultural theological ethics. Gender and gender roles vary greatly in different cultures and social contexts and

⁵⁸ Farley, *Just Love*, 67.

⁵⁹ Farley, *Just Love*, 66–67.

⁶⁰ Farley, *Just Love*, 68.

⁶¹ Farley, *Just Love*, 65.

are often influenced by religious beliefs. This makes it clear that gender is not only important for theological ethics in general, but also for intercultural theological ethics specifically. As I emphasized throughout this chapter, it is essential to consider gender as part of the reality of every life, especially since (intercultural) theological ethics seeks to reflect on the question of the good life and to offer orientation in this respect. Gender is not only an important aspect of identity but also the cause of discrimination and gender-based violence, which significantly impede the realization of a good life. As a category of analysis, insecurity, and justice, gender plays a fundamental role. Insofar as theological ethics wants to establish universally valid norms while also doing justice to people and their distinct experiences, it is necessary to critically examine gender, both generally and with regard to one's own discipline. In the context of intercultural theological ethics, gender sensitivity, intersectionality, decolonialization, and postcoloniality, combined with a realistic, holistic, multidimensional, and inclusive anthropology, are absolutely necessary in order to do justice to the reality of human life with all its facets and entanglements.



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10. Stimulating Change in Local Contexts

Richard N. Rwiza

Small Christian Communities (SCCs) as a new model of the Church are a pastoral priority in Eastern Africa and the world over. They are an expression of the existing praxis of the local Church. SCCs can serve a key role in a pastoral strategy for promoting intercultural theological ethics. Theological Ethics is a way of reflection that considers the human aspiration to understand the will of God in human life. When using the Bible, SCCs have to take into account the historical and time-conditioned nature of the text on the one hand, and yet acknowledge the normative value of God's Word for the Church of every age on the other. SCCs stimulate change by sharing life experiences motivated by biblical reflection. Doing intercultural theological ethics implies being engaged in dialogue. Let us consider the distinctive role of SCCs in stimulating change by focusing on the practical life of their members.

From Pastoral to Practical Theology

Intercultural theological ethics focuses on the existing praxis of the Church. This implies a movement from pastoral to practical theology.¹ According to Rodrigo Mejia Saldarriaga, pastoral theology is referred to as practical theology for various reasons. First, its material object is the praxis of the Church in the heart of a particular human situation. Pastoral activity is a matter of the whole life and activities of the Church in the world. It is not restricted to the activities of the clergy or the liturgy. Hence, in promoting intercultural theological ethics, it is not enough to affirm that "Jesus is the answer" if we ignore the (burning) questions posed in SCCs.

¹¹ Rodrigo Mejia Saldarriaga, "From Pastoral to Practical Theology," *Good Shepherd: A Journal of Pastoral Theology* 1, no. 1 (2016): 28–41.

In this context, we are dealing with a (pastoral) theology that is born out of praxis and it deserves the name practical. Mejia Saldarriaga writes that “the formal object of Pastoral Theology, or its good, is the analysis of those situations of the Church in the light of Faith and Tradition in order to propose an ever adequate pastoral praxis.”² By implication, the focus is not on the pastor but on the faithful for whom the pastor renders service. SCCs serve as spaces for engaging with the practical realities of life as experienced by believers and are thus a pastoral priority.

Practical theology “begins with a base in practice, moves towards theoretical reflection, and then returns to practice.”³ It attempts to make sense of the life of faith in a particular culture. This is done by narrowing the gap between God and faith on one hand, and the lived reality in the specific culture on the other. It is an issue of the hermeneutics of lived religion, such as that which is experienced in SCCs. It is a theory of text interpretation and is concerned with the critical development of text interpretation. It is basically linked to the human aspiration to understand the will of God in human life.

In the context of SCCs, practical theology is deeply committed to living a life of faith, rather than intercultural or disciplinary reflection.⁴ Practical theology focuses on the ministry and less on intellectual reflection that is done in academic institutions. “Theology in Africa is engaged with African contextual life issues which result in multiple African theologies, rather than one type of theology.”⁵ Such a focus on context leads to a theology of contextualization. A Small Christian Community is fundamentally a communion of families; this is its context. It is in this setting that people experience God’s Word and have an opportunity to share the Eucharist. They share their time, possessions, and meals in the theological context of solidarity. In SCCs, the Gospel is contextualized.

² Mejia Saldarriaga, “From Pastoral to Practical Theology,” 30.

³ Vhumani Magezi, “Practical Theology in Africa: Situation, Approaches, Framework and Agenda Proposition,” *International Journal of Practical Theology* 23, no. 1 (2019): 119.

⁴ Magezi, “Practical Theology in Africa,” 117.

⁵ Magezi, “Practical Theology in Africa,” 117.

Theological Contextualization

Intercultural theological ethics is linked to theological contextualization—that is, the quest to localize or find the situational meaning of a metanarrative. This can be seen as a process of inculturation. As Daniel Dei observes, “Contextualization of the Gospel is a missiological necessity.”⁶ It is a matter of theologizing while being aware of the context. As Peter Ignatius Gichure notes, “Doing contextual theology is not a choice but an imperative.”⁷ Intercultural theological ethics is an attempt to combine many apparently contradictory positions into a form that can be understood and accepted by most people in the Church. This is done while remaining truthful and faithful to the Christian tradition. According to Lisa Sowle Cahill, “Catholic social ethics offers a tradition of political practices, Church teaching, and interpretation theologies that explicitly connects the praxis of the reign of God with public analysis and participation.”⁸ In this context, contextual theology is a process of making the Word of God incarnate in a given community. Such a setting can be that of a Small Christian Community. It is a context for doing intercultural theology, which is a means of interpretation, a method of doing theology. In this vein, A. Dulles notes, “The present helps us to liberate ourselves from the tyranny of the past, and the past to escape from the idolatry of the present.”⁹

Theological contextualization in Africa seeks to make the message of Christianity meaningful within the comprehensive worldview of the African milieu. It takes into account the local language and symbolism of the culture used in SCCs. Daniel Dei writes, “Theological contextualization’

⁶ Daniel Dei, “An Integrated Approach to Theological Contextualization in Africa,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 46, no. 3 (2019): 11.

⁷ Peter I. Gichure, *Contextual Theology: Its Meaning, Scope and Urgency* (CUEA Publications, 2008), ix.

⁸ Lisa Sowle Cahill, “Theological Ethics, the Churches, and Global Politics,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 35, no. 3 (2007): 392. Catholic social thought has attempted to adapt to global cultural pluralism.

⁹ Avery Dulles, *The Survival of Dogma* (Doubleday, 1987), 183.

represents the search for the meaning of the Christian message in thought, behavioral and feeling patterns that resonate with familiar symbolisms found in the comprehensive worldview of the recipients' cultural milieu."¹⁰ Contextualization encourages recipients to theologize themselves, linking local churches and local theologies. It is a means to promote intercultural theology. "The crux of contextualization is the smooth communication and interaction between the message of Christianity and different cultures," as Stephen Bevans notes.¹¹ This indicates the fact that religious beliefs and practices are inseparable from the culture of a given people.

Intercultural theological ethics has opened room for various models of contextual theology.¹² In the anthropological model, the main challenge of a theologian is to uncover God's self-revelation as expressed within the culture of those receiving the message of Christianity. The translation model focuses on the need to communicate the message of Christianity in different cultures in a dynamic and functionally equivalent way. In this context, the main task of the theologian is to search for meaningful ways of expressing the Christian message in different cultures, and in a way that does not compromise the content of the never-changing Word of God.¹³ Thus, there is a need "to appreciate the challenge of pluralism: to dialogue from and beyond local culture and to interconnect with a world church not dominated solely by a northern paradigm."¹⁴

One of the crucial pastoral and ethical challenges facing the Church in Africa is that of dual allegiance—the tendency of Christian converts in

¹⁰ Dei, "An Integrated Approach to Theological Contextualization in Africa," 12.

¹¹ Dei, "An Integrated Approach to Theological Contextualization in Africa," 12.

¹² See Stephen Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Orbis Books, 2002).

¹³ Bruce Fleming, *Contextualization of Theology: An Evangelical Assessment* (W.C. Library, 1980), 62.

¹⁴ Linda Hogan and Kristin Heyer, "Beyond a Northern Paradigm: Catholic Theological Ethics in Global Perspective," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 39, no. 1 (2019): 21–22, who quote from the Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church (CTEWC) mission statement. The CTEWC network has managed to promote theological conversations across and beyond the boundaries that construct and reinforce marginalization.

Africa to culturally profess belief in Christianity but revert to indigenous ways of perceiving and responding to reality inwardly.¹⁵ This dichotomy is even experienced in SCCs. Intercultural theological ethics has to focus on an integrated approach, and as Dei observes, “Respect for recipient culture must always be a starting point.”¹⁶ This is a positive view of the culture of another. Missionaries ought to express the content of God’s self-revelation in a manner that is intelligible to recipients.

Everyday solidarity is a framework for integrating theological ethics and ordinary moral choices.¹⁷ It is a way to promote a culture of moral discernment among the faithful, even in SCCs. The ability to discern what is good and what is bad requires the type of moral reflectiveness that leads to convictions. Solidarity highlights the relational and social dimensions of the human person. Such awareness of common interests and norms offers a calculated alternative to individualism. Solidarity in SCCs insists that moral change requires not only personal conversions but also changes to social structures. It is founded in human interconnectedness. Solidarity summons personal conversion and structural change.

In view of African solidarity, members of a Small Christian Community share a common concern for the common good. African spirituality has been a catalyst for spiritual formation. “At the broadest level authentic spirituality is an integrative wholistic response to the command to choose life,” as James N. Amanze writes.¹⁸ This is rooted in the natural desires, longings, and aspirations of the human heart.

In Africa, Christianity is attracting followers in great numbers. According to a report from 2010, “Sub-Saharan Africa now is home to about one-in-five of all the Christians in the world (21%) and more than

¹⁵ Dei, “An Integrated Approach to Theological Contextualization in Africa,” 16.

¹⁶ Dei, “An Integrated Approach to Theological Contextualization in Africa,” 16.

¹⁷ Conor M. Kelly, “Everyday Solidarity: A Framework for Integrating Theological Ethics and Ordinary Life,” *Theological Studies* 81, no. 2 (2020): 414–437.

¹⁸ James N. Amanze, “Contextuality: African Spirituality as a Catalyst for Spiritual Formation in Theological Education,” *Ogbomosho Journal of Theology* 16, no. 2 (2011): 2. He is quoting Marie McCarthy, “Spirituality in a Postmodern Era,” in *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology*, ed. J. Woodward and S. Pattison (Blackwell, 2000), 199.

one-in-seven of the world's Muslims (15%).”¹⁹ A report from 2020 states that “[b]y 2020, these two world religions found themselves in a strong position with Africa becoming the continent with the fastest population growth in the post-World War II era. . . . By 2020, Christians and Muslims combined accounted for over 9 out of every 10 people in Africa (94%).”²⁰ African spirituality is a reality. As Amanze observes, “It is a genuine brand of spirituality born and bred in Africa long before the coming of Europeans as a political entity and of Christianity and Islam as religious ideologies.”²¹ In Africa, religion is so diffused that it penetrates the entire spectrum of African life as experienced in SCCs. A considerable number of Africans are deeply dedicated to Christianity or Islam and yet continue to practice elements of traditional African religion. Even in SCCs people still continue to hold on to their cultural values. This points to the relevance of inculturation.

Meaning of Inculturation

Intercultural theology has been a sphere for doctrinal development. Inculturation and doctrinal development have been a means of incorporating new insights into the Christian Tradition. Doctrinal development is a concept in theology that suggests that the claims and insights of Christian doctrine grow over time. Such development can be historically situated. Rose Kane refers to Avery Dulles who “views development of doctrine as reformulations of Church teaching in each age to reflect the needs,

¹⁹ Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life, “Tolerance and Tension: Islam and Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa,” April 15, 2010, www.pewresearch.org/religion/2010/04/15/executive-summary-islam-and-christianity-in-sub-saharan-africa/.

²⁰ Amadu Jacky Kaba & The University of the Gambia, “The Numbers and Percentages of Christians and Muslims in Africa, 2020,” *The International Journal of African Catholicism* 11, no. 1 (2022): 18, www.researchgate.net/publication/382214185_The_Numbers_and_Percentages_of_Christians_and_Muslims_in_Africa_2020.

²¹ Amanze, “Contextuality: African Spirituality as a Catalyst for Spiritual Formation in Theological Education,” 13.

concerns and outlooks of each age.”²² It is a way of articulating some novelty. There is progress in the understanding of Christ’s teachings in line with what is contained in the Tradition and promulgated by the magisterium of the Church.

Inculturation remains culturally specific. However, it contains promise as a way to generate doctrinal development for the wider Church. According to Pedro Arrupe, inculturation contains “the incarnation of Christian life and the Christian message in a particular cultural context in such a way that this experience not only finds expression through elements proper to the culture in question . . . but becomes a principle that animates, directs, and unifies the culture, transforming and remaking it so as to bring about a ‘new creation.’”²³ Thus, inculturation contains a dimension of universality, but also calls for changes within ourselves. We are affected individually, as are SCCs. Inculturation is a process that integrates Christian faith into local socio-religious realities. SCCs must not be on the receiving end.²⁴ Inculturation entails an effort to articulate the meaning of the Gospel in a particular context in response to the realities of that milieu.

Expanding the geographical and historical scope of inculturation gives inculturation more clarity and power. Inculturation acknowledges potential for doctrinal development. “New cultures bring new eyes and new perspectives, such that they will see Jesus differently in ways that stand to challenge, develop and reform the Church’s understanding of the Gospel,” as Kane writes.²⁵ Various cultures have contributed to shaping new trends in SCCs and in global Christianity.

²² Ross Kane, “Inculturation as Doctrinal Development: Shaping International Theological Categories,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 24, no. 2 (2022): 240, doi.org/10.1111/ijst.12545. He quotes Christopher Kaczor, “Thomas Aquinas on the Development of Doctrine,” *Theological Studies* 62, no. 2 (2001): 286.

²³ Pedro Arrupe, “Epistola et Documentum studii de Inculturatione (14 maii 1978), Versio anglica: To the Whole Society,” *Acta Romana Societatis Jesu* 17 (1977): 257.

²⁴ Laurenti Magesa, *Anatomy of Inculturation: Transforming the Church in Africa* (Orbis Books, 2004).

²⁵ Kane, “Inculturation as Doctrinal Development,” 256.

Current Trends in World Christianity

Intercultural theology is an exercise in border-crossing. The cultural diversity of world Christianity and new theological voices are unveiling new landscapes of the global Christianity, especially in Africa. Christianity has experienced a radical Southern shift in terms of its center of gravity. The center of religious cultural unity is no longer the West. The Church needs to be culturally adapted in order to represent a world Christianity.²⁶ The center of gravity continues to move to Africans, Asians, and Latin Americans. In the case of Africa, it seems Kiswahili is increasingly becoming one of the notable languages of Christianity. According to Stan Chu Ilo: “World Christianity also brings to greater focus the new challenges facing Christianity” especially “in the new contexts of faith in the Global South and in the Western mainline.”²⁷ Meaning is now conceived in an inter-subjective and intercultural reality, hence the need for intercultural communication. There is now, as Ilo writes, “a movement away from a unilateral, top-down approach to religious and theological education to the integration of multiple sources of truth and diverse approaches of learning, while admitting the diversities and pluralism in God’s revelation in history.”²⁸

What is shared in the process of intercultural theology is the Word of God revealed in Christ and experienced in person, ecclesial communities, and cultural life. As Ilo writes, “Theology is a dialogical movement both internal and external to the subject. Theology is a reflective process of faith by individuals and communities of faith in their experience of God’s

²⁶ Stan C. Ilo, “Currents in World Christianity and the Challenges of Border-Crossing and Intercultural Theology,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 158 (2017): 37–56.

²⁷ Ilo, “Currents in World Christianity and the Challenges of Border-Crossing and Intercultural Theology,” 41.

²⁸ Ilo, “Currents in World Christianity and the Challenges of Border-Crossing and Intercultural Theology,” 42.

revelation in particular history. Theology, therefore, can never be formless.”²⁹

The missiological task communicates Christ across cultural and linguistic divides. As Jim Harries notes, “debate on theology has to be a process of the discovery of the unknown using the known, where he of whom understanding is sought is God.”³⁰ There has to be an acknowledgement of the mystery and unknowableness of God. It is only when a person is ready to have one’s concept of God questioned that true theological debate can occur.

In the context of intercultural biblical exegesis, as Jean-Claude Loba writes, the “African context and people are not used just as a field of applying ‘exegetical’ conclusions, but they stand as the subject of interpretation, equipped with genuine epistemological privilege.”³¹ In this context, exegesis is concerned with the meaning of a text in regard to its author and who it addresses, but it may also be conducted with a view towards application to the modern situation. There are various ways that relate the biblical text to the context of SCCs. What is distinctive about the use of the Bible in SCCs is that willingness to be related to life with the aim of uplifting and deifying society. In this way change is stimulated in the local context. It also involves social transformation and justice. This dimension is crucial in inter-cultural theological ethics.

Stimulating Change in SCCs: Dialogue in Communal Contexts

SCCs have served as fora for inter-cultural ethics, where change is stimulated in a communal context. These basic communities are usually a

²⁹ Ilo, “Currents in World Christianity and the Challenges of Border-Crossing and Intercultural Theology,” 51.

³⁰ Jim Harries, “‘The Name of God in Africa’ and Related Contemporary Theological, Development and Linguistic Concerns,” *Exchange* 38, no. 3 (2009): 276.

³¹ Jean-Claude Loba-Mkoke, “The New Testament and Intercultural Exegesis in Africa,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 30, no. 1 (2007): 24.

neighborhood group. The urban model is of persons who live together in an apartment building or row of houses, or workers who live together in a housing project. The rural model is of a communion of families in the same neighborhood or geographical context. Additionally, Joseph G. Healey observes that “SCCs that are composed of a mixture of ethnic groups are common especially in urban or semi-urban areas. But SCCs that are composed of a mixture of people from different economic classes are not common.”³² The issue of various ethnic groups points to the relevance of intercultural ethics.

In stimulating changes, SCCs come from the bottom up. Such communities offer an inculturating contextualization model for the Church, one that attempts to form and transform, drawing on the daily life and experiences of people themselves. In this context, such communities reveal the best of an age while indicating new dimensions of the gospel of fidelity. They stimulate metanoia—changing one’s mind, a reorientation. It can be a basic transformation of one’s outlook or vision. This can motivate a new way of loving God and others. In this context, the Gospel can be lived in an extraordinary way. This is also reflected in the way in which the SCCs refer to their patron saints to transform abstract claims of preaching and theology into concrete lived experiments. The patron saints are the saints to whose intercession and protection, a person or society, a church or a place is dedicated. Such saints are chosen as special guardians over various dimensions of life. Praxis is prior to theology; hence, the theology of SCCs ought to evolve out of practical grassroots experiences.

Light up Neighborhood

SCCs stimulate change by sharing life experiences motivated by biblical reflections. Doing theology in the African context necessarily demands an

³² Joseph G. Healey, “Twelve-Case Studies of Small Christian Communities (SCCs) in Eastern Africa,” in *How Local is the Local Church: Small Christian Communities and the Church in Eastern Africa*, ed. A. Radoli (Gaba Publications, 1993), 78.

African reading of the Bible.³³ This requires the use of appropriate African concepts to illuminate the meaning of corresponding biblical teaching. This approach aims at pointing out the new understanding and application of the biblical text in the local context.

Additionally, SCCs are dynamic in nature and assume various forms as they influence and are influenced by contemporary life. As Alphonce Omolo observes, “These emerging neighborhood communities introduced the sharing of life experiences during Bible gatherings, which began to create solidarity and the realization of the commonality of the hardships that afflicted the communities.”³⁴ The need to reflect on actions and act on reflections cannot be overvalued when implementing pastoral priorities in the local Church.

Most SCCs have not emerged out of great theoretical speeches but rather from the faith and love of a poor and simple people. They have stimulated Christians to seek change. In solidarity with Church leaders, the people have searched for strategies to live out their faith in a locality experiencing extreme poverty, pain, exploitation, violence, and an aspiration for liberation. “Evangelization, in this model of the Church whose center is the laity, the community, the Word of God, and the salvation and liberation of human beings both individually and socially, has produced significant conversions,” Alicia Butkiewicz writes.³⁵ Such conversion is not a single event. Our failings often remind us of the frailty of human nature, and conversion often reminds us of the grace of God that is available to overcome our weakness.

³³ See Albert Ngege Mundeke, ed., *A Handbook on African Approaches to Biblical Interpretation*, (Kolbe Press, 2012).

³⁴ Alphonce Omolo, “Small Christian Communities Light up Neighborhood in Kisumu,” in *Small Christian Communities Today: Capturing the New Movement*, ed. J. G. Healy and J. Hintan (Orbis Books, 2005), 80 [Page numbers to this book refer to the E-book publication].

³⁵ Alicia Butkiewicz, “Pastoral Commitment to BCCs in Bolivia,” in *Small Christian Communities Today: Capturing the New Movement*, ed. by J. G. Healy and J. Hintan (Orbis Books, 2005), 17.

Pastoral Priorities

SCCs have been adopted as a pastoral priority of the local Church in Eastern Africa. According to Rodrigo Mejia, “Pastoral priorities are never deduced from theological principles, but they are commanded by the real needs of the people of God.”³⁶ The focus is on a dimension of Jesus’s mission identified in the Gospel, which calls for us to live the message he teaches. Such pastoral priorities are rooted and founded in the faith of the people of God.

In the pastoral priorities of the local Church in Eastern Africa, there is still a challenge of transition. As Mejia observes, “Africa is passing from traditionally closed and rural societies to the global village of today’s world.”³⁷ Changes are part and parcel of life, but they can be assimilated according to the identity of the people. The following question posed by Mejia must also be confronted: “How can Christianity introduced into Africa by foreign missionaries in their own cultural outlook become really meaningful to African people?”³⁸ This pastoral challenge points to the need for the inculturation of Christianity. For the process of inculturation to produce change at the grassroots level, it must not be viewed solely as a clerical responsibility, such that the clergy take on the task of inculturating the Gospel message for the African people, while excluding the people themselves in SCCs.

Participation, Formation of the Youth

SCCs have contributed much in promoting participative ministry. Christopher Cieslikiewicz notes that “the church in Africa is a young church, when one considers that a great percentage of the population is

³⁶ Rodrigo Mejia, “The Pastoral Priorities of the Local Church in Eastern Africa,” in *How Local Is the Local Church: Small Christian Communities and the Church in Eastern Africa. Symposium of Nine Papers (Spearhead 126-128)*, ed. A. Radoli (AMECEA Gaba Publications, 1993), 104.

³⁷ Mejia, “The Pastoral Priorities of the Local Church in Eastern Africa,” 106.

³⁸ Rodrigo Mejia, “The Pastoral Priorities of the Local Church in Eastern Africa,” 107.

sixteen to twenty-five years old. Nevertheless, only a small number of young people participate in the meetings of SCCs.”³⁹ However, this challenge ought to be faced. How can such basic communities appeal to young people? Pastoral strategic planning that ignores the needs, presence, and role of young people in evangelization is destined to fail. Young people represent a vital force and a source of innovation and creativity, which ought to be taken into consideration in setting pastoral strategies.

Formation of the youth is an important strategy for effective evangelization. As the young participants of the pre-synod note, “The Church is asked to devise new approaches and new instruments and forms of involvement, adapted to the young generation, who are asked to participate and add their own characteristic mark.”⁴⁰

SCCs are a strategy to stimulate change by “listening to what the spirit is saying to Churches” (Rev. 2:7). This exhortation is directed to the whole Church to strengthen communion and encourage individual congregations to hold fast to what they have. SCCs are a distinctive sign of the times and a notable voice of the Holy Spirit. Such communities have turned out to be a powerful force of renewal within parishes. “However,” Cieslikiewicz notes, “this new moment goes beyond structures and touches also lay participation in the life of the local Church.”⁴¹ Such active involvement needs to be sustained by a distinctive spirit of synodality.

Expression of Synodality

SCCs are expressions of the Church as a communion of faith, hope, and love. They concretize the spirit of synodality in the life and mission of the local Church. A synod is an invitation for the local ordinary, and the

³⁹ Christopher Cieslikiewicz, “Involvement of Parish-Based SCCs in Dar es Salaam,” in *Small Christian Communities Today: Capturing the New Movement*, ed. J. G. Healy and J. Hintan (Orbis Books, 2005), 74.

⁴⁰ Stella, Leticia, Giulia, Nelson, Paul and Matthias, “Letter of Invitation to participate through the Social Media: We talk together. Pre-synodal meeting for young people 19–24 March 2018,” secretariat.synod.va/content/synod2018/en/pre-synodal-meeting/letter-of-invitation.pdf, 2.

⁴¹ Cieslikiewicz, “Involvement of Parish-Based SCCs in Dar es Salaam,” 72.

faithful under him, to journey together on a life of faith. It is an expression of communion. As Vitalis Mshanga notes, “The leaders of the local Church ought to listen to both the local Church as they do to the universal Church, symbolized by the Bishop of Rome. Therefore, the Church is a communion of faith, hope and love.”⁴² There is stimulation of change in the local contexts. The real Church is “the first level on which synodality is exercised is the local Church. Here ‘the pre-eminent manifestation of the Church consists in the full active participation of all God’s holy People in these liturgical celebrations, especially in the same Eucharist, in a single prayer, at one altar, at which the Bishop presides, surrounded by his college of priests and by his ministers.”⁴³ SCCs are fora for theological reflection that serve as a catalyst to motivate and generate religious insights for better celebration of synodality: communion, participation, and mission.

In searching for a new African Christian spirituality, SCCs have a vital role too. According to Laurenti Magesa, “Deconstruction and reconstruction constitute the current vocation of the Church in Africa: it is a process that leads to a new way of being truly African and fully Christian.”⁴⁴ This process demands the destruction of certain time-honored conceptions of both African and Christian identity, but through this destruction a more appropriate contextual way forward emerges.

SCCs: Retrospect and Prospect

SCCs have been adapted by the Association of Member Episcopal Conferences in Eastern Africa (AMECEA) since 1973 as a pastoral priority: “We are committed that in these countries of Eastern Africa it is

⁴² Vitalis Mshanga, “Towards a More Decentralized Church: An Ecclesiological Contribution to the Synodal Process,” in *Utume Theological e-Journal* 3 (2022) [Thematic issue: Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church], 15.

⁴³ International Theological Commission, “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church (March 2, 2018),” no. 77, citing Vatican II, Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 41.

⁴⁴ Laurenti Magesa, “Truly African, Fully Christian? In Search of a New African Christian Spirituality,” in *The Church We Want: African Catholics Look to Vatican III*, ed. A. E. Orobator (Orbis Books, 2016), 63 [page numbers correspond to the E-book edition].

time for the Church to become really 'local', that is: self-ministering, self-propagating and self-supporting. Our plan is aimed at building such local Churches for coming years. We believe that in order to achieve this we have to insist on building Church life and work on basic Christian communities, both rural and urban areas."⁴⁵

Effective pastoral planning requires the active involvement of all the faithful, not just the clergy. In addition, all human institutions need to be evaluated occasionally in order to remain faithful to their mission. For the Church, a critical evaluation may shed some light on the strengths and failures of its past and present activities in a specific context. Such a specific area can be composed of SCCs. They give the local Church an opportunity to scrutinize the vitality of the Church in light of its own faith. SCCs help us understand the concrete way of being and acting in the Church.

Conclusion

SCCs are expressions of the Church as a community of faith, hope, and love. Formed and transformed by the everyday experiences of the people, they serve as models of inculturation for the Church. Praxis is prior to theology; hence, the theology of SCCs ought to evolve out of practical grassroots experiences. Intercultural theological reflection on SCCs has stimulated change in the AMECEA region and beyond. The local Church has to be truly local. Doing intercultural theological ethics has helped make the local Church really local, as well as self-ministering, self-propagating, and self-supporting.



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⁴⁵ AMECEA, *Planning for the Church in Eastern Africa in the 1980's: Record of the AMECEA Study Conference held at St. Thomas Aquinas Seminary, Nairobi, 14–21 December 1973*. A summary was published in *African Ecclesial Review* 16, nos. 1–2 (1974): 29–48.

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11. A Genuine Intercultural Ethics Requires a Decolonized Pluriversal Dialogue Between the Colonizers and the Colonized

Jude Thaddaeus Buyondo

Introduction: A Search for a Genuine Intercultural Ethics between the Colonizers and Colonized

In this investigation, the question of intercultural ethics presupposes at least two cultural worlds: the culture of the colonized and that of their colonizers. In this regard, the former represents the African world (colonized) while the latter represents the European world. At 11.73 million square miles (30.38 square kilometers), Africa is the second-largest continent (after Asia) and was the last massive region of the world that Europeans colonized (between 1880 and 1910). More specifically, at the end of the nineteenth century, Europeans oversaw the conquest of sub-Saharan Africa in particular, dividing the resource-filled nations between European governments at the expense of African countries during the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885. All tended not only to be essentially optimistic about the potential wealth of the new colonized territories in terms of both natural resources and cheap labor, but also embraced a vague mandate to “civilize,” “culturize,” “improve,” and “develop” the colonized.¹ In subsequent decades, the limited honest interaction between the colonized and the colonizers gave rise to continued coloniality. Even today, as Nelson Maldonado-Torres contends, coloniality is exceedingly pervasive:

¹ Helen Tilley, “Medicine, Empires, and Ethics in Colonial Africa,” *AMA Journal of Ethics* 18, no. 7 (2016): 743–744.

“As modern subjects, we breathe coloniality all the time and every day.”² In other words, coloniality as a continued form of colonization characterizes our current era. I will clarify what coloniality is in comparison to colonialism in the following section.

Challenges to Achieving Intercultural Ethics: Coloniality and Colonialism

If we are to appreciate the intercultural need of a decolonial turn between the colonizers and the colonized, we cannot help clarifying the concepts of coloniality and colonialism. The difference between the concepts of coloniality and colonialism is clarified by great Latin American scholars. Though Enrique Dussel (who died on November 5, 2023) is the most senior scholar among them and the most widely published on coloniality and decolonization at the philosophical and theoretical levels, Walter Mignolo remains, perhaps more than anyone, the greatest contributor to the decolonial turn globally and across several centuries.³ If we are to make use of his peculiar distinction, colonialism refers more to political and economic relations that could be characterized by domination and exploitation of the colonized, while coloniality signifies continuing ways of thinking that evolved from colonialism even after its collapse.⁴ Advancing the intercultural decolonial turn by explicating the relationship between colonialism and coloniality further, Ramón Grosfoguel understands

² Nelson Maldonado-Torres, “On the Coloniality of Being: Contributions to the Development of a Concept,” *Cultural Studies* 21, nos. 2–3 (2007): 243, doi.org/10.1080/09502380601162548.

³ Nelson Maldonado-Torres, “Thinking Through the Decolonial Turn: Post-Continental Interventions in Theory, Philosophy, and Critique—An Introduction,” *Transmodernity: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World* 1, no. 2 (2011): 1–15; 8, doi.org/10.5070/T412011805.

⁴ Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of the Renaissance: Literacy, Territoriality, and Colonization*, 2nd ed. [first ed. 1995] (University of Michigan Press, 2003). In chapter four of his book on local histories and global designs, Mignolo notes that when theories surface in places where colonial legacies are still in the memories of scholars and intellectuals, these theories may be perceived as new forms of colonization. Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton University Press, 2000), 172–214.

coloniality as “the continuity of colonial forms of domination after the end of colonial administrations.”⁵ More precisely, in explicating this continuity of longstanding colonial patterns of dominion, Maldonado-Torres elaborates more on how coloniality survives colonialism and brings out more clearly the distinction between coloniality and colonialism in intercultural pursuits:

Colonialism denotes a political and economic relation in which the sovereignty of a nation or a people rests on the power of another nation, which makes such a nation an empire. Coloniality, instead, refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations. Thus, *coloniality survives colonialism*. It is maintained alive in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of peoples, in aspirations of self, and so many other aspects of our modern experience. In a way, as modern subjects *we breathe coloniality all the time and every day*.⁶

Undeniably, the significant point in the intercultural pursuit of a genuine dialogue, in which coloniality still survives colonialism, is how the colonized enduringly continue to breathe the superiority of the colonizers within a globalized pursuit of an intercultural ethics, to an extent that modernity cannot simply be conceived outside coloniality. Modernity is foremostly grasped as “a product of the European Renaissance or the European Enlightenment,” a discourse that “would not be possible without coloniality,”⁷ to an extent that we mostly talk of the universality of Eurocentric production of knowledge. We understand human rights

⁵ Ramón Grosfoguel, “The Epistemic Decolonial Turn: Beyond Political-Economy Paradigms,” *Cultural Studies* 21, nos. 2–3 (2007): 219.

⁶ Maldonado-Torres, “On the Coloniality of Being,” 243, emphasis inserted.

⁷ Maldonado-Torres, “On the Coloniality of Being,” 244.

and religion, and the broader “coloniality of knowledge,”⁸ against other would-be contributive forms found amongst the colonized, and these latter forms are repeatedly understood as downright inferior. One may additionally note that in spite of people from different cultures and countries having contributed to the universalized understanding of (for instance) human rights, some voices, notably African, seem not to have sufficiently received an intercultural hearing, which further reinforced, and still reinforces, coloniality. To demonstrate the current persistence of coloniality in the pursuit of genuine intercultural ethics, particularly in reference to Mignolo’s legendary studies on the needed decolonial turn globally, scholarship highlights how coloniality still strongly rests on epistemic and ontological biases that validly endorse the colonizer’s hegemony and superiority while invalidating, marginalizing, and eroding the knowledge, experience, and rights of colonized peoples.⁹ Just to mention a more specific example, we cannot help but mention the consequences of both coloniality and colonialism to the slave trade, the effects of which are still felt.

For illustration, slavery has not only depopulated the colonized nations of their energetic industrious members, but it has also continued to validate an imbalance of power between the colonized and the colonizers, which is accompanied by modern exploitative racism disguised in various frames that limit genuine dialogue and numerous interculturalization efforts. Moreover, we cannot forget the exploited economic resources and the economic urge to supply not only raw materials but also a cheap workforce (or free labor) to industries in the developed world, and also to target the markets of the colonized, where the processed goods from countries that colonized them are ultimately sold back to them at a

⁸ Anibal Quijano, “Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality,” *Cultural Studies* 21, nos. 2–3 (2007): 168–178.

⁹ Maldonado-Torres, “On the Coloniality of Being,” 240–270; Linda Martin Alcoff, “Mignolo’s Epistemology of Coloniality,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 7, no. 3 (2007): 79–101; Hussein A. Bulhan, “Stages of Colonialism in Africa: From Occupation of Land to Occupation of Being,” *Journal of Political Psychology* 3, no. 1 (2015): 241.

marked-up price. Countless simpler examples include indigenous people continuing to shun their local religions, languages, and names in preference to those of their Western colonizers. All this is plainly manifest in the concept of continued coloniality, where “the colonized do not exist except for the needs and convenience of the colonizers.”¹⁰ The pending question that needs to be answered is how to decolonize modern coloniality.

And in this twenty-first century that almost lacks significant gestures of a decolonization ethic, which would help deactivate modern coloniality, decolonial projects remain largely untapped in the contemporary epoch of coloniality. As Chammah J. Kaunda observes, “The African everyday life is permeated by gestures of struggles and resistance against coloniality and everyday politics of death arising from neo-colonial political accounts of the present.”¹¹ The problematic becomes clearer that the dominant melodies of coloniality experienced in Global Southern cultures prove recurrent visible challenges in achieving a genuine intercultural ethics. In this study, I appreciate intercultural ethics as the pursuit of a uniform project of the global community, in which we generate and negotiate functioning norms—in appreciation of our cultural values—which streamline and empower our global cultural interrelationships. Some of these cultural interrelationships are not simply interhuman or intercommunal but rather also transpire between broader global cultural communities and demand both the colonized and colonizers to embrace an intercultural ethics that appreciates our multi-coloredness, as well as the possibility of entering a genuine dialogue that is short of modern coloniality.

¹⁰ Bulhan, “Stages of Colonialism in Africa,” 245.

¹¹ Chammah J. Kaunda, “Sawubona: A Theo-Ethic for Everyday Decolonial Gestures,” *Acta Theologica* 43, no. 1 (2023): 45.

Towards a Genuine Decolonial Ethics (Decolonization Ethics)

I propose that if intercultural ethics is to appreciate how multi-colored we are, it has to address the whole. I admit that this desired intercultural wholeness is still far from our reach as we witness coloniality to date. Consequently, given fears arising from the continued existence of coloniality among and across some cultures, and as precipitated by contemporary tendencies of recolonization and neocolonialization—former colonizers returning recently in the form of business investors—these fears can be better handled within genuine intercultural efforts that aim at decolonizing intercultural ethics by challenging all forms of coloniality without exception. Genuine decolonization or decolonial ethics should not only aim at revoking all forms of colonial amnesia—for instance, a universalized ethics that is still largely regulated by Western standards—so that intercultural realities can without hindrance productively flourish for all, but also facilitate mental decolonization of the colonized, allowing them to outgrow the effects of past colonial injustices.

For both the Global South and Global North, the colonized and colonizing peoples, the universalized and localized senses of ethics remain open to conversion which paves the way to a deeper and more fruitful intercultural network (wholeness). Many colonized peoples have been able to outgrow some negative effects and productively transform and localize foreign values, enabling them to flourish within the global community. Nevertheless, for integrative intercultural ethics that I envision to triumph, we must overthrow the mentality of standardizing one's ethical norms,¹² since this would still constitute a form of coloniality and a continued mental colonization.

¹² Godfrey B. Tangwa, "Global Bioethics: An Introduction by Henk ten Have," *Developing World Bioethics* 18, no. 3 (2018): 269; Alozie O. Onwubiko, "Re-encountering African Culture in Living Christianity in My Father's Home," *QUEST: An African Journal of Philosophy/Revue Africaine de Philosophie* 19, nos. 1–2 (2005): 93–94.

We are in no way suggesting that we ought not domesticate what is foreign. It would, e.g., be undesirable for Africans to continue bemoaning the imposed European languages on the African continent as well as colonial systems of education in foreign languages, since the advantages of modern writing over the African oral tradition are obvious, as different studies have disclosed. Contemporarily however, modern writing and scientific education belong to no single culture any more than to the single intercultural human family—even when we may culturally view reality differently (cultural tint). For instance, scholarship looks at English as a world language that has different valid variants globally (west Africa, east Africa, India, etc.), meaning that we cannot fully attach to it a hegemonic colonial trait. In other words, being against colonial imperialism is not tantamount to rejecting western values or domesticating them. But reflecting on such cultural tints shouldn't prevent us from humbly recognizing that "objective reality" should be understood among the colonized and colonizing peoples as multi-colored.¹³

This means that the pursuit of genuine intercultural ethics ought to appreciate how reality is multi-colored, and this means "no human community is perfect, and hence, no system of morality is perfect."¹⁴ So we cannot make any normative claims about universal knowledge on the basis of one specific culture. This implies not only a possibility of *gradual perfection*, since no rationality, tradition, morality, or approach to ethics is fixed or static, but also a chance *to enrich* and *be enriched interculturally*. This means that the cultures of the colonizers and colonizing are both equally fallible and perfectible, and also implicitly suggests that negative attitudes towards colonialism can be outgrown and directed positively towards a productive transformative intercultural ethics (*a genuine*

¹³ Godfrey B. Tangwa, "Colonialism and Linguistic Dilemmas in Africa: Cameroon as Paradigm," *QUEST: An African Journal of Philosophy/Revue Africaine de Philosophie*, no. 1–2 (1999): 4, 9–10; Godfrey B. Tangwa, *Elements of African Bioethics in a Western Frame* (Langaa Research and Publishing Common Initiative Group, 2010), 96, 108–109.

¹⁴ Tangwa, *Elements of African Bioethics in a Western frame*, 142.

decolonial ethics)¹⁵ that speaks to the value of acknowledging the multiple spaces of cultural realities people occupy in the global community.

Decolonial ethics in intercultural ethics challenges the tendency of foreign value systems to reduce all the varied global understandings of values to one particular understanding of life. On the one hand, integrating the ex-colonies' world of values into global discourses humbles the global community, forcing them to desist from offering Global North *cultural particulars* as *universal norms* to be followed by every culture. Some have referred to this need as obligatory for "decolonizing universality."¹⁶ On the other hand, intercultural ethics can assist ex-colonials to realize a sufficient *mental decolonization* by exorcising colonial conceptions. Such conceptions include delusions that colonialism is the only reason for the crises and underdevelopment of Africa and its recent ethical challenges like human trafficking or modern slavery.

However, my argument is modest: to complete the unfinished project of genuinely decolonizing ethics, whenever we give a voice to an African thinker in intercultural ethics,¹⁷ we should also give a voice to global North partners. In this regard, the decolonization assignment compels Africans and non-Africans in equal measure. Both the colonizers and the colonized need to be freed from the stranglehold of colonial bonds (*coloniality*). Indeed, to decolonize ethics is to embrace the rich multiplicity of

¹⁵ Puleng Segalo and Lien Molobela, "Considering Africanist Research Ethics Practices in Social Science Research in Africa," in *Social Science Research Ethics in Africa*, ed. N. Nortjé, R. Visagie, and J.S. Wessels, Research Ethics Forum 7 (Springer, 2019), 45.

¹⁶ Suriumurthee Moonsamy Maistry, "Threats to Decolonial Immanent Ethics," *African Journal of Inter/Multidisciplinary Studies* 3 (2021): 31. Mbih J. Tosam raises a similar worry: "Proponents of culturally responsive bioethics are concerned that common morality may result in moral imperialism because of the asymmetry of power in the world and . . . that the difference between the leading Euro-American and indigenous African construal of autonomy is that the former ascribes greater weight on individual self-determination while the latter emphasizes responsibilities towards the community." Mbih Jerome Tosam, "Global Bioethics and Respect for Cultural Diversity: How Do We Avoid Moral Relativism and Moral Imperialism?," *Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy* 23, no. 4 (2020): 611.

¹⁷ Godfrey B. Tangwa, "Giving Voice to African Thought in Medical Research Ethics," *Theoretical Medicine and Bioethics* 38, no. 2 (2017): 103.

worldviews springing from lived social and spiritual realities. Each culture interacts with its environment, and the environments of other people, in different ways. It is from this perspective that one side must question whether all structural constraints have been inflicted by Western colonialism, while the other side must cultivate the meekness to withdraw from any superimposition of their kind of ethics as infallible, since imported ethics may not relevantly tally with local spiritual-social realities, or they may alienate people from their rich and peaceful histories of life. They also may not embrace rich social realities that more abundantly promote genuine intercultural life.

Towards a Genuine Intercultural Dialogue

For a genuine intercultural ethics, I propose a decolonial ethics that ultimately requires us to genuinely embrace a decolonized intercultural dialogue—devoid of coloniality—between the colonized and the colonizers. Before expounding on decolonial ethics, it should be mentioned that colonialism shouldn't be confined to some geographic areas and eras,¹⁸ nor to some inoperative outdated systems, at least in our current discussion. It is this enduring colonial dominion, this modern form of coloniality, that we should genuinely decolonize.¹⁹

Decolonial ethics must reinvigorate a moral global responsibility for how best the colonized and colonizers can amicably embrace non-dominative relationships of coexistence and kindredness in spite of a contemporaneous colonial environment where Eurocentric ethical thoughts still act as modern assimilative and normative forces,²⁰ an impulse which hinders present-day intercultural life and which we must neutralize through decolonial ethics. Decolonial ethicists reject boundaries defined by culture or a nation-state assumed in hierarchical and exclusionary

¹⁸ These concepts are described by Bulhan, "Stages of Colonialism in Africa," 240.

¹⁹ See the description of coloniality by Bulhan, "Stages of Colonialism in Africa," 240–241.

²⁰ Noah De Lissoy, "Decolonial Pedagogy and the Ethics of the Global," *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 31 no. 3 (2010): 283.

legacies of coloniality.²¹ They challenge modern coloniality as a global contemporary fact, and most especially its continued presence amongst the colonized—i.e., the continued legacy of the colonial logic in the colonized nations.²² The question remains how best we can ethically arrive at the global fusion of the two logics and epistemologies, that of the colonized and the colonizer. What we are looking for is not merely an intercultural ethical dialogue, but more specifically a genuine intercultural dialogue.

In order to achieve this genuine intercultural ethics, while respecting concrete experiences in specific contexts, this chapter suggests “decolonial ethics” should not only serve as a means for Africans (the colonized) to genuinely outgrow past colonial fears and move towards intercultural life, but also should prompt Western partners (former colonizers) to cultivate genuine humility to learn from other cultural values and so abstain from offering their understanding of cultural ethics as the standardized universalized ethics, at least if we are to achieve a genuine intercultural ethics devoid of modern tenets of coloniality. However, this requires renewing everyday practice. As Kaunda notes:

I am arguing that academic decolonial talk in the African academy is a decolonial problem that has essentially become another talk within the black hole of the legacies of colonialism and its invention—neo-

²¹ Mahmood Mamdani, *Neither Settler nor Native: The Making and Unmaking of Permanent Minorities* (Harvard University Press, 2020). De Lissovoy argues that a decolonial ethical orientation to globality (solidarity) is “possible only in the context of a recognition of the relations of power that have shaped history, and in particular the political, cultural, economic, and epistemological processes of domination that have characterized colonialism and Eurocentrism. Imagining an ethics of the global in this context means articulating a *decolonial* perspective.” De Lissovoy, “Decolonial Pedagogy,” 279. Such a perspective is based on non-dominative principles of coexistence and kindredness. See also Louiza Odysseos, “Prolegomena to Any Future Decolonial Ethics: Coloniality, Poetics and ‘Being Human as Praxis,’” *Millennium* 45, no. 3 (2017): 447–472, doi.org/10.1177/0305829817704503.

²² Maldonado-Torres, “On the Coloniality of Being,” 240–270; Maldonado-Torres, “Thinking Through the Decolonial Turn,” 1–15; Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Duke University Press, 2011).

colonialism. Without engaging everyday decolonial gestures, academic decolonial talk is an impractical solution to global coloniality. The continent is bombarded with decolonial theories that not only do not arise from everyday life but also have no bearing on concrete experiences and social problems.²³

Closer scrutiny of concrete experiences in cultures is necessary without any discrimination in dialogue, if we are to embrace a genuine intercultural ethics.

Intercultural Ethics Necessitates a Bidirectional Pluriversal Dialogue

Having emphasized that a genuine intercultural ethics necessitates a decolonial ethics, one that requires us to embrace a decolonized dialogue between the colonized and the colonizers, I now turn to my core objective—realizing a genuine “decolonized pluriversal dialogue” as a fundament of intercultural ethics. Representatives of pluriversality share “a critique of the Euromodern world’s claim to universality and an assertion of multiple ontologies and the importance of the political and ethical implications of those ontologies.”²⁴

The decisive need for a pluriversal dialogue arises when a specific cultural perspective claims to offer the world universal knowledge, thus demonstrating a lack of healthy intercultural interaction. Relatedly, Hamid Dabashi, a major scholar of postcolonial thought, wonders, “How did Europe universalize its particularities, particularized other people’s universalities, and made itself normative to others’ abnormativity?”²⁵ The question of *how* the universalization of these particularities came about seems less relevant for this study, but the question of how we can neutralize

²³ Kaunda, “Sawubona: A Theo-Ethic for Everyday Decolonial Gestures,” 46.

²⁴ Kimberly Hutchings, “Decolonizing Global Ethics: Thinking with the Pluriverse,” *Ethics & International Affairs* 33, no. 2 (2019): 117, doi.org/10.1017/S0892679419000169.

²⁵ Hamid Dabashi, *Europe and Its Shadows: Coloniality After Empire* (Pluto Press, 2019), 52.

the *consequences* of modern coloniality is more pertinent. In approaching this dialogue, we ought to judiciously scrutinize globalization in relation to cosmopolitanism. If we were to assume, just like Mignolo, that globalization is a set of designs to manage the world, while cosmopolitanism is a set of projects toward planetary conviviality,²⁶ both globalization and cosmopolitanism fail to help us achieve the desired genuine intercultural dialogue. The cosmopolitan pursuit of universal conviviality is in danger of not embracing a genuine decolonized dialogue since the dominating approach remains inclined to a particular way of life at the expense of another.

Where cosmopolitan approaches tend to articulate abstract principles developed from within a particular Western tradition, decolonial approaches reject abstract global designs in favour of inter-cultural dialogue amongst multiple people(s), including peoples who deem collective and non-human entities to be of fundamental moral importance. In addition, decolonial global ethics rejects universality in favour of “pluriversality.”²⁷

Accordingly, a genuine decolonized dialogue that eschews any cosmopolitan pursuit of universal conviviality must arise from a genuine intercultural decolonial ethics and should possess at least two traits. Firstly, it should be an ethics that is context sensitive. Secondly, it should be an ethics that is pluriversalist—i.e., an ethics that rejects an abstract universal approach to ethics in favor of a genuine intercultural dialogue.²⁸ In proposing an intercultural ethics, it must respect cultural contexts and embrace genuine intercultural dialogue as part of a broader pluralistic cultural interaction of global communities.

To further illustrate the problematic, among some Global South cultures, there is continuous fear of losing contextual indigenous values to

²⁶ Walter Mignolo, “The Many Faces of Cosmo-Polis: Border Thinking and Critical Cosmopolitanism,” *Public Culture* 12, no. 3 (2000): 721.

²⁷ Robin Dunford, “Toward a Decolonial Global Ethics,” *Journal of Global Ethics* 13, no. 3 (2017): 380–397, doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvr0qtvb, see abstract and notes 4 and 6.

²⁸ Moosa-Mitha Mehmoona, “Decolonial Ethics as a Framework for Anti-Islamophobic Social Work Praxis,” *International Journal of Social Work Values & Ethics* 19, no. 2 (2022): 24–25, doi.org/10.55521/10-019-205.

foreign values on the one side, as well as a deepened inferiority-superiority complex between the colonized and the colonizers on the other side. The fear of re-experiencing disuniting historical injustices like the slave trade, colonization, the loss of cultural values, and so on makes some cultures in the Global South hesitant to view modern attempts as genuine moves towards intercultural ethics, since these moves appear to be neither context sensitive nor open to a decolonized pluriversalist dialogue.

In summary, a pluriversal dialogue (pluriversality) doesn't privilege universality of principles—one single universal truth—but rather recognizes the plurality of values in a world where we are all equally human. Secondly, a pluriversal dialogue is not encoded in one particular cultural epistemology but rather arises from a genuine intercultural dialogue. Thirdly, pluriversality is not an expression of a global consensus, but rather emerges from a genuine dialogue that acknowledges the quality of different values arising from our various cultural diversities.²⁹ In short, to take pluriversality seriously is to appreciate a functional intercultural life where “a pluriversal ethics addresses the question of how to cultivate a practical ethic of coexistence and collaboration with others in an ontologically plural and radically hierarchical world.”³⁰ Therefore, achieving a genuine intercultural ethics imposes on us an ethical obligation to embrace a decolonial ethics that should ultimately merit a decolonized pluriversality. The dialogue between the colonized and the colonizers must be bidirectional.

²⁹ Pluriversality informs us that there are pluriversal values achievable through a genuine dialogue across cultures. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*; Enrique Dussel, *Ethics of Liberation: In the Age of Globalization and Exclusion*, ed. A. A. Vallega, trans. E. Mendieta, C. Pérez Bustillo, Y. Angulo, and N. Maldonado-Torres (Duke University Press, 2013); Dunford, “Toward a Decolonial Global Ethics,” 380–397; Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, “The Decolonial Mandela: Embodiment of Peace, Justice, and Humanism,” *Journal of Developing Societies* 31, no. 3 (2015): doi.org/10.1177/0169796X15590326; Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, “From a ‘Terrorist’ to Global Icon: A Critical Decolonial Ethical Tribute to Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela of South Africa,” *Third World Quarterly* 35, no. 6 (2014), doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2014.907703.

³⁰ Hutchings, “Decolonizing Global Ethics: Thinking with the Pluriverse,” 115.

From Decolonial Ethics to Theo-Ethics

We have broadly proposed decolonial ethics as a steppingstone towards a productive pluriversal dialogue that ultimately gives birth to intercultural pluriversal ethics. For Dunford, “An exhaustive and definitive statement of decolonial ethics . . . would be impossible, for decolonial ethics has emerged from, and must remain open to being shaped by, *dialogues amongst millions* of grassroots actors and activists.”³¹ A genuine pluriversal dialogue would fulfil the noble vision of a decoloniality that is not based on some “virtue of an already-existing universality that can be articulated from one particular place, but on the basis of resonances amongst, translation across and the construction of common understandings amongst multiple positions.”³² Such pluriversal dialogues overcome modern epistemic coloniality and come to value “a world in which other worlds are possible . . . a world in which multiple cosmovisions, worldviews, practices and livelihoods co-exist.”³³ By respecting intercultural resonances, we would be opulently appreciating how to pluriversalize pluralistic understandings and rich cultural experiences, for instance of “medical pluralism” and “human rights,” instead of relying solely on the universalized Western interpretation. In this sense, then, decolonial ethics (i.e., a decolonized pluriversal dialogue) would broadly mean “working toward a vision of human life that is not dependent upon or structured by the forced imposition of one ideal of society over those that differ, which is what modernity/coloniality does and, hence, where decolonization of the mind should begin.”³⁴

Moreover, in characterizing the genuine relationships of a decolonized dialogue, scholars like Maldonado-Torres propose that such relations in which “the de-colonial turn highlights the epistemic relevance of the

³¹ Dunford, “Toward a Decolonial Global Ethics,” 381, emphasis added.

³² Dunford, “Toward a Decolonial Global Ethics,” 390.

³³ Dunford, “Toward a Decolonial Global Ethics,” 380–381.

³⁴ Walter D. Mignolo, “Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality and the Grammar of De-Coloniality,” *Cultural Studies* 21, nos. 2–3 (2007): 459.

enslaved and colonized search for humanity,” should “become the norm rather than the exception.”³⁵ It is therefore supremely important to engage the colonized at the same level as the colonizers, so the dehumanized among them aren’t reduced to subhuman levels in any desired intercultural relationships.

If we are truly working towards a genuine intercultural ethics, an ethics that requires a decolonized pluriversal dialogue, we cannot presuppose functioning integral relationships. I wish to elaborate how the contribution of the African culture to establishing such relationships, and therefore a genuine intercultural dialogue, can come from the theo-ethical understanding of contextual experience. This experience can become a source for a decolonial dialogue. It is based on the African view that everything is related. We can say these relationships reverence a kind of theo-ethic—faith in God’s immanence within relationships—that “is grounded in radical interconnectedness of existence, the perennial fact that everything is everything through everything, that existence is co-substantively bestowed upon everything by everything. . . . This also means that everything is creatively constituted by relations, and that nothing pre-exists relationships, including God (God is eternally relational).”³⁶

Theo-Ethics as a Process of Healing and Reconciliation in Genuine Intercultural Ethics

In pursuit of a theo-ethics that advances cooperative relationships of mutual coexistence, we ought to briefly understand healing and reconciliation in African human communities. Firstly, for Bantu, when *muntu* (an individual) is sick, the relational community is similarly sick, signifying that if *muntu* desires healing, the community too desires

³⁵ Nelson Maldonado-Torres, *Against War: Views from the Underside of Modernity* (Duke University Press, 2008), 7.

³⁶ Kaunda, “Sawubona: A Theo-Ethic for Everyday Decolonial Gestures,” 42. I think of a theo-ethics as a cosmic-spiritual (religious) ethics that unendingly embraces intercultural *relations* with God at the apex. See also page 44.

healing—along with reconciliation, since both experience frailty jointly. And since sickness concerns the living community members directly, *muntu* necessarily needs physical and psychological healing through confessions of guilt which are embedded in the rites of reconciliation.³⁷ The aim is a newly re-energized interpersonal coexistence of both the individual and the relational community. Secondly, reconciliation presupposes the spiritual community which includes former and future human beings and the divine.

However, it is a contemporary moral challenge to accord Western life with a theo-ethics in an African sense, since in the West there are less associations with the spiritual realm. Most Bantu would connect a fruitful reconciliation with a communicative life of dialogue between God and *muntu*, which shows the relatedness of all forms of life: “God, divinities, ancestors, the living and yet-to-be-born and every created thing—visible and invisible are present. It is a radical awareness that the presence of one is the presence of all. You kill one, you’ve killed all. It is the capacity to recognize and affirm the intrinsic value of all things.”³⁸

Because of this relatedness, the African dialogue-oriented communicative ethics cannot reduce *muntu*’s healing and reconciliation only to a philosophical discursive ethics.³⁹ Given that the theo-ethical attitude is indispensable to any pursuit of intercultural ethics from an African viewpoint, an African would, for example, expect healing not only of her body but of her totality.⁴⁰ Since African disease etiology is

³⁷ Bénédet Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethic: Beyond the Universal Claims of Western Morality*, trans. B. McNeil (Crossroad, 2001), 47. Originally published in German under the title *Wider den Universalanspruch westlicher Moral* (Herder, 2000).

³⁸ Kaunda, “Sawubona: A Theo-Ethic for Everyday Decolonial Gestures,” 52.

³⁹ See Bujo, *An African Ethic*, 48; Bénédet Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community: The African Model and the Dialogue Between North and South* (Paulines Publications Africa, 1998), 38. Originally published under the title, *Die ethische Dimension der Gemeinschaft: das afrikanische Modell im Nord-Süd-Dialog* (Universitätsverlag Freiburg/Schweiz, 1993).

⁴⁰ See Godfrey B. Tangwa, *African Perspectives on Some Contemporary Bioethics Problems* (Cambridge Scholars, 2019), 65.

understood as a communal, moral, and spiritual issue,⁴¹ an all-inclusive healing and reconciliation essentially aims at an integrative life, which cannot happen without God. It is why a theo-ethics of healing and reconciliation reestablishes the broken relationships—not only with the living community, but also with the spiritual community of the ancestors. According to African medical anthropology, one can trace one's suffering to one's own incorrect behavior in relation to a deceased family member, necessitating one to responsibly confess their guilt and be reconciled with the family for the healing process to be successfully completed.⁴²

In contrast to the theo-ethics of the colonizing cultures, the African approach to theo-ethics deeply fosters reconciliation with the “community of victims”⁴³ or the “victimized of history” by spiritually reestablishing memory of the ancestors. Here, integrative healing and reconciliation, as understood by the colonized Bantu, includes the invisible world of those who were victimized in the past and forgotten, while the colonizers seem to forget the communicative ancestral bond with the victimized of the past. Therefore, it is clear how the victims of the past are so vital to an African theo-ethics, which takes a different moral approach to achieve genuine intercultural ethics, since a Western approach to ethics scarcely integrates the victimized of the past and their lively communicative action with the contemporary living community.

A concrete instance of theo-ethics, of reconciling the community of victims with the victimizers, is in Archbishop Desmond Tutu's approach in “The Truth and Reconciliation Commission” (TRC). For Tutu, there is “no future without forgiveness,” since true healing and reconciliation cannot deny the victimized of the past.⁴⁴ The commission followed the apartheid period in South Africa, where the colonizer's humanity was perhaps as dehumanized as that of the colonized.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Bujo, *An African Ethic*, 97; Laurenti Magesa, *What Is not Sacred? African Spirituality* (Orbis Books, 2013), 93.

⁴² Bujo, *An African Ethic*, 46. See also Bujo, *Ethical Dimension of Community*, 183–185.

⁴³ Bujo, *Ethical Dimension of Community*, 32.

⁴⁴ Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (Rider, 1999), jacket.

⁴⁵ Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, 35.

In Tutu's interpretation of the African theo-ethic, postcolonial reconciliation reunites both the colonized and the colonizers, where the colonized forgive the colonizers, and the latter fully acknowledge the past ills committed.⁴⁶ If we recall what gave birth to the "National Unity and Reconciliation Act" of July 26, 1995, which initiated the TRC led by Tutu, its mandate of reconciling the oppressed and the oppressor is firmly stated in chapter 2 of the Act—"Objectives of the Commission": "§3(1) the objectives of the Commission shall be to promote national unity and reconciliation in a spirit of understanding which transcends the conflicts and divisions of the past by . . . (c) establishing and making known the fate or whereabouts of victims and by restoring the human and civil dignity of such victims by granting them an opportunity to relate their own accounts of the violations of which they are the victims, and by recommending reparation measures in respect of them."⁴⁷ Here Tutu leads South Africans to realize how a genuine intercultural life rests on a theo-ethics of bringing together the victimized with their victimizers without alienating themselves from their spiritual attachment to ancestors. This is valued since it brings relational peace to hurt or injured intercultural relationships with the ancestral past, enabling a healed present and reconciled future. Michael Battle concludes:

There can be no peaceful presence as long as the spirits of the dead are not laid to rest. Therefore many relatives of murdered or disappeared persons ask the TRC to help them get back from the police the remains of their loved ones in order to bury them in a decent and dignified manner. . . . This is the way in which harmony between the generations is restored and maintained. The bringing home of the one who is lost,

⁴⁶ Luis Cordeiro-Rodrigues, "Towards a Tutuist Ethics of War: Ubuntu, Forgiveness and Reconciliation," *Politikon* 45 (2018), 432–433.

⁴⁷ Tutu, *Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act 34 of 1995 (South Africa)*, Government Gazette 16579 (vol. 361), July 26, 1995.

even the one who is guilty, *to the place of the ancestors is a vital aspect of the peace of the living.*⁴⁸

An African approach to theo-ethics includes the injustices of the historical past. It holds those responsible for the unethical past accountable. Unlike a Western approach to theo-ethics, an African approach encompasses not only reconciliation and taking responsibility for past injustices but also acknowledging the inappropriate actions of one's ancestors and demonstrating a readiness to admit these wrongs.⁴⁹ Such a theo-ethic, as noted already, is well portrayed in the TRC, which united the victimized (the colonized) and victimizers (the colonizers), exhorting them to pay attention to their historical wrongdoing before embracing a reconciliation that never called for the ill-treatment of victimizers. It is such a theo-ethical reconciliation that avoids the continued recurrence of horrific injustice and rectifies the circumstances without necessarily punishing the victimizer.

Spirituality, Theo-Ethics, and Intercultural Decolonial Ethics

Therefore, intercultural decolonial ethics “should be understood as an action of recovering spirituality, meaning and values in everyday interactions, exchanges and encounters among the masses,” and it does this by “recovering both the active and passive *vital force* as an African *force of life* primed to act relentlessly in history, not because we were once enslaved and colonized, but because . . . everyday expressions and everyday encounters are means of *becoming*.”⁵⁰ Decolonial spirituality respects passive and active vitality in every social-intercultural construct. This vitality is intrinsically interwoven with the present-past-future realities as new

⁴⁸ Michael Battle, “A Theology of Community: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu,” *Interpretation* 54, no. 2 (2000): 173–182, 180, emphasis added.

⁴⁹ Bujo, *An African Ethic*, 43–44.

⁵⁰ Kaunda, “Sawubona: A Theo-Ethic for Everyday Decolonial Gestures,” 47.

beginnings,⁵¹ and can be increased or decreased in intercultural relationships. This can be compared to the paradoxical relationship of God—the ultimate vital force in the African thinking system—with creation as clear in Philippians 2:6. In an intercultural theo-ethics, we are upholding the divine-community mystery relationship—i.e., the community understood as divine liminality, being unified with God, though not equal with God and never God at all.⁵² Correspondingly, in seeking a solution towards functional decolonized intercultural relationships, we ought to know that

decolonisation does not only take place in academic offices or fallisms, because it is about transformation in collective thinking and modification in people's everyday social actions . . . it is an everyday gesture from below. Decolonial gestures are about everyday life as it unfolds. . . . Decolonial spirituality arises from a collective emancipatory consciousness wrought by indignation and genuine commitment to becoming authentic humans and it is possible only by mutual recognition of each other. . . .⁵³

Affirming the intrinsic value of all things is core to cultivating a functioning intercultural relationship. And since life is mutually animated by all, it is unbecoming to forget, for instance, the spiritual presence of our ancestors, who walked this world. The ancestors are the original custodians of the world and are the architects of the knowledge and unifying spiritual-belief systems that have been systematically marginalized or totally destroyed by colonialism.⁵⁴ In African encounters, the goal of healing is *wholeness*—since everything shares in divine life—and we turn to this to address the continuous ache caused by colonality. This explains why African rites and rituals, for instance, are cosmological events in which the totality of creation must always be present. Even African greetings, to take

⁵¹ Kaunda, "Sawubona: A Theo-Ethic for Everyday Decolonial Gestures," 54.

⁵² Kaunda, "Sawubona: A Theo-Ethic for Everyday Decolonial Gestures," 55.

⁵³ Kaunda, "Sawubona: A Theo-Ethic for Everyday Decolonial Gestures," 48.

⁵⁴ Maistry, "Threats to Decolonial Immanent Ethics," 26.

a simpler example, open up liminal sites to promote a genuine life of theo-ethics and so decolonial spirituality, since they foster exchange, intra-active experience, intra-action, and intercourse of life itself.⁵⁵ Here wholeness must incorporate the indigenous understandings of life, of both spiritual and social relatedness—i.e., it must address the actual histories wounded by coloniality and the totality of authentic experiences of the colonized, as well as of the colonizers and their broader community members like the ancestors.

Conclusion

In proposing a genuine decolonial ethics, intercultural ethics must, first of all, shun all false binaries like the *developed West* versus *primitive Africa*, an all-powerful Global North and a toothless Global South. Secondly, Africans must reclaim their functional participation in intercultural ethics by transcending discontent and victimhood.⁵⁶ Thirdly, intercultural ethics must appreciate *critical intercultural universalism* as a necessary ingredient of the needed decolonial turn, a turn by which genuine intercultural ethics has to welcome the pursuit of both indigenous values—for instance, by not lowering the status of African values within their own history—and universal mutual goals without absolutizing any (and also without prioritizing the universality of Western values). I have suggested a “decolonial ethics” that embraces a theo-ethical approach, as both a means for Africans (the colonized) to genuinely outgrow past colonial fears and move on, as well as other global Western partners (former colonizers) to cultivate some humility, to learn from other cultural values and so desist from offering their particular cultural ethics as the standardized—through recolonization, neocolonialism, and so on—universalized approach. We must do this if we are to achieve a genuine intercultural ethics permeated with theo-ethics.

⁵⁵ Kaunda, “Sawubona: A Theo-Ethic for Everyday Decolonial Gestures,” 51.

⁵⁶ Táfwò Olúfẹ̀mí, *Against Decolonisation: Taking African Agency Seriously* (Hurst & Company, 2022).

I have suggested that a genuine intercultural ethics should appreciate intercultural pluriversality as a critical tool towards decolonial ethics. Intercultural ethics should critically define epistemic substitute approaches to colonial ethics. Moreover, intercultural pluriversality should critically question the consequences of coloniality and consequently empower developing decolonial ethics with a new inclusive ethics delinked from purportedly universal systems. Rather, if we are to learn anything, these practical values should be developed from an uninterrupted genuine intercultural dialogue that respects the quality of our multiple rich differences, and a dialogue that genuinely offers something more than a mere alternative to modern coloniality.



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12. Personal Experience of Difference and Convergence: Teaching Moral Theology in Sri Lanka and Rome

Vimal Tirimanna, CSsR

Since I have been asked to reflect under the above title with the main purpose of stimulating further reflection on teaching moral theology in two culturally diverse contexts, I limit myself to a few brief remarks on my personal teaching experiences in two very diverse contexts.¹ In what follows, I will use a first-person narrative style by which both differences and convergences will emerge on their own, even if they are not explicitly stated.

Teaching in Two Different Continents

I have been teaching theological ethics for the past twenty-eight years. I teach theological ethics mainly in Sri Lanka (Asia) and in Rome (Europe) during the two halves of every year—a semester each. Thus, for nearly three decades, I have had the annual experience of teaching on two different continents to two very different types of students, and in rather diverse cultural contexts, as I shall explain below.

In Sri Lanka, I have taught at the National Seminary of Our Lady of Lanka (NSA), Kandy since 1995.² In the past, in addition to this, I also

¹ This presentation concentrates exclusively on my personal experiences of teaching.

² Only major seminarians aspiring for the priesthood—both diocesan and religious—study in this seminary. In the past, this seminary served as the one and only papal seminary for the whole of South Asia—that is, for India (which then included present Pakistan and Bangladesh), Burma, and Ceylon (Sri Lanka). It was established in 1893 under a special decree of Pope Leo XIII as the papal seminary for South Asia, and was shifted to Pune, India in 1955. Currently, it is administered by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Sri Lanka (CBCSL) and is the main academic center for theological studies in the country. It has an average annual student population of some 250 seminarians from a majority of the local dioceses and religious congregations. At times, students

taught for many years at the Aquinas University College, Colombo; the Theological College of Lanka, Pilimathalawa (belonging to the non-Catholic Christian Churches in Sri Lanka); and the Sinhala Lay Theologate, Colombo. At the first three places the medium of instruction is English, while at the last place, the Sinhala Lay Theologate, instruction is in Sinhalese, the main local language in Sri Lanka.

Every now and then, I also teach theological ethics elsewhere in Asia—for example, at Dharmaram in Bangalore, India, where I have taught intensive courses a couple of times. In Rome, I have been teaching at the Pontifical Accademia Alfonsiana since 2005, at the Pontifical Beda College since 2011, and at the Pontifical Urban University since 2018. At the first and the last places, I teach in Italian, while at the second place, I teach in English.

Thus, I have had unique experiences as a professor not only in Sri Lanka and Rome (two very diverse cultural contexts) but also *within* Sri Lanka and Rome. This is challenging, but it has also given me invaluable teaching experiences that have enriched me as a moral theologian—something which I would have never learned from books or through academic speculation.

My Experiences of Convergence and Divergence

Teaching in Asia (Sri Lanka)

Just as in the rest of Asia where I teach, in Sri Lanka my students hail from diverse cultures, mainly Sinhalese and Tamil. In a country that has suffered ethnic tensions for nearly three decades, the fact that the language of teaching is English certainly serves as a bridge-builder for the two main linguistic communities of the country, though today only a few in the Sinhalese and Tamil communities fluently speak English. Their lack of a

(mainly belonging to religious congregations) from countries such as India, Pakistan, Indonesia, and a few African countries also study here, occasionally giving it an international feel.

working knowledge of English is the main disadvantage of teaching theological ethics in English in Sri Lanka. Although most of the seminarians and religious are given courses in English for two to three years (or even more) in their respective formation houses before they join the theological curriculum of the major seminary (NSA), their level of the language remains quite weak.³ As such, one wonders at the end of their theological studies how much of what was taught has had the desired effects on them.⁴ My first-hand experiences tell me how these students in general tend to think first in their own local idioms and languages, and then make efforts to express themselves in English (quite an uphill task for them), especially when those who have some courage (to express themselves in English) raise questions during my lectures. The same holds true when they respond to questions during oral examinations. Most of the academic papers assigned to them and their answers on written exams also clearly portray an inner struggle with the language. Even at the Aquinas University College and the Theological College of Lanka (TCL), I have had similar experiences.

Consequently, there is a general tendency among the students in Sri Lanka to learn by heart whatever is taught, especially the notes given, and then simply to repeat them at exams, whether they really understand what they express or not. This tendency is further reinforced by the system of education prevalent in secular studies in Sri Lanka. Even when courses are taught in the local languages—Sinhalese and Tamil—the predominant practice is for the teachers to give notes and ready-made answers to the possible questions that may be asked at examinations (even at public examinations, such as the GCE—General Certificate of Education, Ordinary and Advanced Level Exams). In my experience, this has become

³ Of course, there is an entrance exam, mainly to check their knowledge of English, but getting through that exam often does not mean that the candidates have a good working knowledge of English.

⁴ In addition to serving as “a bridge-builder” between the two main ethnic communities, teaching in English has other important advantages—such as the availability of theological literature in English and the availability of a ready-made theological vocabulary that the two main local languages lack.

a sort of a “spoon feeding,” and does not help students to internalize what they study, nor does this system encourage students to themselves do any further personal research through extra readings around the relevant subjects, or even to merely reflect on what they study. Often, a parrot-like repetition is all one gets at the exams. In order to avoid this danger, and also to encourage the students to do personal studies (and thereby internalize what they study), as a rule, I do not give notes (except when strict definitions are necessary). Instead, in my courses on theological ethics, I encourage students to take down their own personal notes as I deliver my lectures. I also refer them to various articles and books, which hopefully make them get engaged enough to do at least some reading around the subject(s) concerned.

Being a theological institute that is affiliated with Rome’s Pontifical Urban University (the “Urbaniana”), the syllabus for each of the courses of the theological curriculum in the NSA is prescribed by this University. The lecturers are expected to strictly adhere to these syllabuses. Although the list of what is known as “theses” (topics or themes) sent by the Urbaniana allows three local contextual theses to be incorporated into the list, the authorities at the National Seminary are not interested in doing so, for whatever reason. Consequently, the theological curriculum is mostly oriented towards classical European theology, even though the seminarians hail from Sinhalese and Tamil backgrounds (coming more from villages than from urban cities) and will be later ministering as priests mostly in their own Sinhalese and Tamil contexts.

Since the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Sri Lanka (CBCSL) is the custodian of the National Seminary, the questions that can be discussed during the lectures are quite limited, because most of the lecturers are reluctant to entertain theologically controversial questions lest they irritate the bishops, who are the ones who appoint the lecturers. Moreover, most of the lecturers themselves are not interested in dealing with contextual topics relevant to their particular courses but simply stick to their syllabuses as prescribed by Urbaniana. For example, in theological ethics, the question of population control and the Church’s official teachings on

artificial contraception is dealt only within the contours set by the Urbaniana. At the same time, most of the seminarians are themselves highly conservative and rarely ask questions that are “outside the box,” so to speak. Even those who do raise important, critical questions have to think twice because of the risk of calling their own orthodoxy and loyalty to the magisterium and her teachings into doubt. To be considered eligible for ordination to the priesthood in contemporary Sri Lanka, orthodoxy and loyalty are a must. This has prompted a tendency that at times amounts to blindly repeating what the hierarchical Magisterium teaches without expressing any doubts or raising any questions. Moreover, the teachings of Vatican II are not dealt with as a separate subject in the seminary theological curriculum, and they are only given a passing reference in some sources. Obviously, in such an academic context, whenever I, as a lecturer of theological ethics, make it a point to raise some controversial ethical issues or to base my remarks on Vatican II documents (along with other moral sources such as scriptures, tradition, etc.), I am the odd man out. But so far, for some thirty long years, I have continued to teach two of the most controversial areas of theological ethics—human sexuality and marriage.

However, at the Theological College of Lanka (which is run by various non-Catholic Christian Churches), the questions and issues raised by the students (who also aspire for ministry in their respective churches) are very different from those raised by the Catholic seminarians at the NSA. Moreover, as a lecturer at the Theological College, I have to base my moral lectures mainly on scripture and at times on the Fathers of the Church and on some traditional elements, but never on the “hierarchical Magisterium,” as the latter is not theologically relevant for the students there. This is a unique experience and a challenge for me as a Catholic professor of moral theology.

At the Sinhala Lay Theologate in Colombo, which was begun in the late 1980s, things are even more diverse, in the sense that most of the students here are lay (non-seminarians) and some of them are married and working. They study theology voluntarily and show a greater interest in

the lectures, and they also bring in certain issues of morality to do with their day-to-day living, in sharp contrast to the NSA students (who are non-working, non-married seminarians). Could this be due to the fact that they live in society and in their respective families, and thus that they are surrounded by various living issues relevant to theological ethics? Or could it be due to the fact that their medium of instruction, reflections, and theological idiom are in the local language and cultural categories? One of my biggest challenges in teaching in Sinhalese has been finding the correct vocabulary for theological terms. It was only in the 1990s that a few dictionaries of Sinhalese theological terms were written for the first time, and even now, after nearly three decades, it certainly is an uphill task at times to find the correct theological terms in the local language and idiom.

Interestingly, at all the places I teach in Sri Lanka (and in Bangalore, too), the students in general are quite open to interfaith marriages, whereas they are not as open to LGBTQ issues or the questions raised by those who are divorced and remarried. Could this be due to the Asian cultural esteem of marriage and family that still prevails? Could their openness to interfaith marriages be a result of their multireligious and multicultural Asian context? Compared to their European counterparts, the theology students in Sri Lanka are more interested in issues related to social ethics. Could this be due to the socio-economic context in which they live?

Teaching in Europe (Rome)

At all the three places where I teach in Rome, I use a lecture style, and I teach in Italian and English. At each place, there are students who come from various countries across the world, with interesting variations or divergences. Basically, the Urbaniana is theologically quite orthodox and the students themselves in general are very orthodox too, whereas at the Alfonsiana students are willing to ask more skeptical questions, even though they are also quite orthodox. At both these universities, a serious problem for the students is expressing themselves in Italian, which is the only language of instruction. But at the Pontifical Beda College, the

medium of instruction is English, and almost all the students have a good knowledge of English.⁵ Here, the students mainly have “late vocations” to priesthood, in the sense that they have joined the seminary at a mature age, often after having worked. The students’ attitudes towards moral issues are evenly divided—some raise troubling issues and questions, while others wish to simply toe the line of the official Church without rocking the boat, as it were. However, with regard to sexual ethical issues, my students at Beda have been unique, in the sense that almost all of them hail from the English-speaking “First World” countries, and their issues of concern are very different from those in Asia. For example, with regard to LGBTQ issues and remarried Catholics, their general thinking is quite liberal, in contrast to their counterparts from Asia, whom I teach. Could this be due to the liberal societies or cultural contexts from which most of them come? Could it also be due to the fact that their own kith and kin are more affected by LGBTQ issues and civil remarriages? However, compared to their counterparts in Asia, most of the students at Beda are not that open to issues of social ethics.

A Few Notable Experiences

During my many years of teaching theological ethics in both Asia and Europe, I have observed a very interesting but troubling phenomenon common to the students in both Sri Lanka and Rome. When I myself was a student/seminarian in the 1980s in Bangalore, India, most of us students used to trouble our professors by raising thorny questions and controversial ethical issues. In responding to us, our professors at that time had a torrid time defending the Church’s official magisterial teachings while we continuously challenged some of those teachings. Surprisingly, in recent times, the scenario has changed completely and radically. Now, it is I (the professor) who keeps on asking thorny questions and raising

⁵ As a result, most of them have free and lively conversations with me during my lectures compared to their counterparts elsewhere in Rome who follow my courses in Italian.

controversial issues in order to provoke constructive responses among my students, and it is my students who go on defending the magisterial teachings! The role of professors and students seem to have switched. My students go all out to defend the official hierarchical Church teachings, often passionately and uncritically. I regard this role change of professors and students as an inevitable consequence of the official hierarchical domesticating or taming of theology and theologians during the decades since the 1980s, and the imposition of a single type of theology in almost all the seminaries and centers of theological studies. The obvious negative consequence is what we notice today, namely, that theology is almost always a mere repetition of what the hierarchical magisterium teaches! No critical thinking or alternative ways of thinking (irrespective of the diverse cultures in which the Catholic Church finds herself all over the world) has been seen in the recent past, and now we seem to be reaping the repercussions of that.⁶

As already mentioned above, in Rome, at both the Alfonsianum and the Urbaniana, the students are from various cultures all over the world, mainly the so-called “Third World” countries of Latin America, Africa, and Asia. However, at Beda, as mentioned above, they are mostly from English-speaking Western cultural backgrounds pursuing “late vocations.” Their attitudes toward and questions about theology are in sharp contrast to what students at the Urbaniana or at the National Seminary in Kandy would be asking.

Moreover, I have observed that some students—both in Sri Lanka and in Rome—have come to seminaries with very fixed theological ideologies, which they try to impose on any theological discussion. This is generally true for those who have joined seminaries later in life, who seem to have somewhat fixed ideas, and have a very limited appetite to learn anything new in theology. For example, for such students, there is nothing to learn with regard to the theology of human sexuality or bioethics because

⁶ Interestingly, it is not just the contemporary students. A number of professors of theology belonging to the younger generation are also victims of this.

everything in those two fundamental areas of moral theology has purportedly been settled, either by Pope John Paul II or by the ideology of North American “pro-life” movements. Moreover, in both Sri Lanka and Rome, I have noticed an alarming rate of ignorance of both fundamental moral theology and of the history of moral theology in my students.

Conclusion

From what I have written, it should be obvious that the experience (and communication) of one language (or expressions of such experiences within a given cultural context) cannot be accurately translated into another. Moreover, the different influences of diverse lived contexts on persons (whether students or professors) inform some of their convictions about human existence, including those related to theological ethics. My own experiences of teaching moral theology in Sri Lanka and Rome show that the depth of experience possible in one language, or the expression of that experience through particular cultural symbols/terminology, cannot simply be translated into another. At least some fundamental contextual differences seem to be rather constitutive and so cannot be easily overcome.



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13. Bioscientific Foundation: Bioscientific Dialogue as Model of Intercultural Dialogue

Adam Widera

Introduction: The Question of the Necessity of a Bioscientific Foundation of Intercultural Ethics

At first glance, when considering theological ethics as a form of intercultural ethics, it seems extremely unusual to use the biosciences as a foundation. Why not focus on more pertinent areas from the cultural sciences or humanities? A first answer may perhaps lie in the fact that theological ethics always requires interdisciplinarity and this includes the biosciences. However, this answer is hardly satisfactory, as it only touches on the necessity of interdisciplinarity in general and does not address the question of the necessity of a bioscientific *foundation* of intercultural ethics. A more promising answer is offered in the context of anthropology by contemporary biology. On the one hand, biology taxonomizes humans as “homo sapiens” and places them in a phylogenetic context with other recent species, thereby identifying them as natural beings whose actual material origin is based in evolutionary contexts. On the other hand—and this is a novelty of modern biology—it also sees humans as cultural beings who, in the context of an independent cultural evolution, have developed “cultural characteristics” that largely elude the language of biology and fall into the realm of cultural studies and the humanities. It is precisely this “double existence” of human as a natural and cultural being, as outlined by biology, that evokes the mutual conditionality of biological and theological-ethical scientificity. Because the biological constitution of the human being represents the elementary reference level, the biosciences offer us indispensable points of reference for the empirical conditions of

personal self-performances, but they are also extending to cultural phenomena that affect the field of intercultural ethics.¹

This chapter proceeds in three steps to show how this double interest of the biosciences and the interaction between the two different research cultures can serve as a model for a dialogue between different cultural traditions in intercultural dialogue and show how evolutionary biology can explain its foundation. First, I outline biology as an epistemological cultural landscape, with a particular focus on the aspects of historical paradigm shifts and methodology. This is followed by a presentation of bioscientific definitions and concepts relating to culture, with evolutionary ethics also being given space on this basis. Finally, we will evaluate how the bioscientific foundation just discussed could be developed.

Biology as Epistemological Cultural Landscape

If, as a theological ethicist, we turn to the bioscientific foundation of intercultural ethics, we do not encounter an inherently uniform subject, as we may have been taught in our own biology lessons. Rather, we discover an entire bioscientific cultural landscape of individual disciplines as subcultures that have grown together over a long and arduous period of time. In short, like all sciences, biology is the product of cross-generational cultural achievements of its pertinent scientific cultures, which we call professional circles.²

Paradigm Shifts as Markers for the Synthetic Cultural Landscape of the Biosciences

Until the time of Charles Darwin (1809–1882), biology existed as a loose hodgepodge of disciplines operating in isolation, most of which had

¹ Udo Zelinka, *Normativität der Natur—Natur der Normativität: Eine interdisziplinäre Studie zur Frage der Genese und Funktion von Normen* (Herder, 1994), 41.

² Martin Bleif, *Das Tier in uns: Die biologischen Wurzeln der Menschlichkeit* (Klett-Cotta, 2021), 16.

developed independently of each other. It was only through the theory of evolution (1858) founded by him and Alfred Wallace (1823–1913) that conceptual links between contextual (e.g., geographical species distributions) and internal factors (e.g., morphological structures) were finally made possible.³ It enabled bridges to be built between the individual bioscientific disciplines and ultimately laid the foundation for their basic *synthetic program*, thereby also evoking significant paradigm shifts during the twentieth century:

- From the 1930s onwards, the modern synthesis combined the theory of evolution with findings from genetics, systematics, population biology, and paleontology.
- Starting in the middle of the 1950s, ethology was founded, which now also included behavioral biology in its basic synthetic program.
- This gave rise to sociobiology⁴ in the 1970s, with which the previously common concept of species selection was abandoned in favor of individual selection. The theory of the *selfish gene*⁵ was the guiding principle here. Based on this, the basic *gene-centric theory* was established, which regarded genes as the sole determining

³ Jürgen Renn, *The Evolution of Knowledge: Rethinking Science for the Anthropocene* (Princeton University Press, 2020), 126.

⁴ Sociobiology investigates the biological basis and evolutionary phylogeny of social behavior and community organization in recent species (including humans). From the 1980s onwards, it developed into evolutionary psychology, which focuses specifically on humans and their cognition. See Ulrich Kutschera, *Evolutionsbiologie: Ursprung und Stammesentwicklung der Organismen*, 4th ed. (Eugen Ulmer, 2015).

⁵ Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford University Press, 1976). According to Richard Dawkins, all organisms are merely vehicles of genes. During their evolution, genes generated ever more complex survival machines for the purpose of reproducing themselves more successfully. The metaphor of the selfish gene thus refers to the genetic instruction that vehicles reproduce as many intraspecific copies as possible. See Chris Buskes, *Evolutionär denken: Darwins Einfluss auf unser Weltbild*, trans. Christiane Kuby and Herbert Post (Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2008), 91.

factor for phenotypic attributes and behavior and consequently as the main actors in the control of biochemical processes and evolution itself.

It was precisely this gene reductionism that paved the way for a dead end in bioscientific theory, with evolutionary and developmental biology existing as independent domains for a long period. For example, in developmental biology, it was not immediately obvious that embryonic development (ontogenesis) and the evolutionary phylogeny of organisms had anything to do with each other. After all, the development researcher focuses on short individual processes and the evolution researcher on lengthy population processes. In an evolutionary context, development was to a certain extent a “black box” between the genetic information (genotype) and the form of the organism (phenotype).⁶

This changed from the mid-1990s onwards with the continuous establishment of *extended synthesis* as the last momentous paradigm shift in the biosciences, whereby the hitherto dominant gene-centrism increasingly lost its following. Gene-reductionist approaches corroded as knowledge of genetic “ambiguity” became more evidence-based: on the one hand, identical genes can lead to completely different phenotypes (principle of plasticity) and on the other hand, different genes can still produce the same phenotype (principle of robustness). Furthermore, it has increasingly been shown that the role of genes within embryonic ontogenesis cannot be viewed in isolation from the immediate environment. In fact, there are continuous interactions between the respective genes, their products (proteins), and the environment, which includes the cell itself, neighboring cells, more distant organ tissues, and finally also the external world.⁷ At the same time, studies on *cultural evolution* gained increasing attention and were successfully included in this basic systems

⁶ Axel Lange, *Evolutionstheorie im Wandel: Ist Darwin überholt* (Springer Verlag, 2020), 45.

⁷ Lange, *Evolutionstheorie im Wandel*, 90–91.

biology approach.⁸ The *multi-level selection theory*⁹ reveals itself here as a groundbreaking synopsis by identifying three further modes of inheritance in addition to the traditional genetic one: an epigenetic-developmental-biological pathway, behavioral transmission, and symbolic tradition. Three aspects are therefore extremely important for our question:

- The theory of *niche construction* emphasizes that all organisms are considered active shapers of their environment and not just passive recipients of selective environmental influences.¹⁰
- In the concept of *inclusive inheritance*,¹¹ aspects of cultural transmission are particularly evident—be it as acquired and learned behavior, or in humans through symbolic transmission by means of writing and language.¹² The theory of *symbolic tradition* directly included here builds unmistakable bridges to domains in the humanities: In the context of cultural co-evolution, symbolic transmission processes take place over generations, with new adaptations constantly being made. In this way, symbolism (as a link between past, present, and future) enables the passing on of collective knowledge and thus influences social behavior. Accordingly, symbolic transmission plays a decisive role, from the formation of identity, values, and norms to overall cultural development. In the sense of niche construction, human societies change their environment directly by means of their cultures and

⁸ Emerich Sumser, *Evolution der Ethik: Der menschliche Sinn für Moral im Licht der modernen Evolutionsbiologie* (De Gruyter, 2017), 30.

⁹ Eva Jablonka and Marion J. Lamb, *Evolution in Four Dimensions: Genetic, Epigenetic, Behavioral, and Symbolic Variation in the History of Life* (MIT Press, 2005).

¹⁰ Kevin Laland, Tobias Uller, Marcus W. Feldman, et al., “The Extended Evolutionary Synthesis: Its Structure, Assumptions and Predictions,” *Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 282, no. 1813 (2015): 20151019, doi.org/10.1098/rspb.2015.1019.

¹¹ Étienne Danchin, Anne Charmantier, Frances A. Champagne, Alex Mesoudi, Benoit Pujol, and Simon Blanchet, “Beyond DNA: Integrating Inclusive Inheritance into an Extended Theory of Evolution,” *Nature Reviews Genetics* 12, no. 7 (2011): 475–486, doi.org/10.1038/nrg3028.

¹² Lange, *Evolutionstheorie im Wandel*, 90.

imaginary symbolic worlds, which in biological terms represent special ecological niches.¹³

- In addition, *evolutionary ethics* is being established to explore the natural history of human morality. It attempts to systematically link natural and cultural evolutionary processes with one another to develop a multidimensional understanding of the phenomenon of human morality.

Bioscientific Methods as Cultural Practices Genuine to Biology

If we describe biology as an epistemological cultural landscape, we can also recognize genuine cultural practices in it, which we call methods. Biology generally has two methodological approaches: on the one hand, organisms can be classified, catalogued, and observed through description and comparison (*descriptive field biology*); on the other hand, they can be taken from nature and cultivated under standardized conditions (*analytical laboratory biology*), enabling an analysis of life processes based on experiments and elicited data. In addition, *evolutionary biology* has a special methodological position in the canon of biological subjects in that it primarily operates according to the principle of historical reconstruction: evolutionary researchers recreate past processes based on evidence (e.g., fossils), whereby DNA analyses have also been used more recently for clarification. Evolutionary biology is therefore largely a historical domain.¹⁴

Furthermore, bioscientific results do not represent “certain truths,” as the current media landscape all too often tries to suggest. Contemporary biosciences do not intend to adopt a universal perspective: Their success is based more on researching components of the material world through dissection, limitation, and reduction.¹⁵ Only hypotheses supported by ongoing data and facts are evaluated as reliable and ultimately summarized

¹³ Renn, *Evolution of Knowledge*, 328.

¹⁴ Kutschera, *Evolutionsbiologie*, 27.

¹⁵ Bleif, *Das Tier in uns*, 13.

into theories in the sense of reliable hypothesis systems.¹⁶ The biosciences generally operate with a methodological naturalism, which represents a methodological limitation that deliberately excludes all questions that cannot be grasped empirically. In the sense of a “non-interventionist agreement,” all observable phenomena must therefore be investigated exclusively using scientific methods.

According to Karl Popper (1902–1994), theories are products of a selection which took place by empirical falsification that can be corrected further or refuted by more recent results.¹⁷ Any disagreements in the specialist community (in terms of an epistemological culture) result from different interpretations and weightings of existing facts. This includes the fact that theories must be supported by as many independent facts and reliable hypotheses as possible (following the principle of independent evidence).¹⁸

“Culture” from a Bioscientific Perspective

Having outlined the biosciences as an epistemological cultural landscape, it makes sense in a second step to examine their peculiar approach to “culture.” This concerns above all how the biosciences define culture and what role they ascribe to culture within human evolution. In addition, space is given to the programmatic newness of an evolutionary ethics derived from this approach, which interprets human morality as a product of natural and cultural evolutionary processes. This reveals an evolutionary-biological interpretation that is of great significance to the understanding of the bioscientific foundation of culture.

¹⁶ Kutschera, *Evolutionsbiologie*, 12.

¹⁷ C. Giovanni Galizia, “Biowissenschaft,” in *Heureka—Evidenzkriterien in den Wissenschaften: Ein Kompendium für den interdisziplinären Gebrauch*, ed. E.-M. Engelen, C. Fleischhack, C.G. Galizia, K. Landfester (Spektrum Akademischer Verlag GmbH, 2010), 23.

¹⁸ Kutschera, *Evolutionsbiologie*, 12–13.

Culture—A Question of Biological Definitions

Like cultures in general, scientific cultures have their own special epistemologies and languages, which can often lead to massive problems of understanding between non-pertinent disciplines due to a lack of translation skills. For example, it is extremely useful to briefly outline the definitions of culture used specifically in biology to make an appropriate distinction for our question—to what extent the bioscientific understanding of culture can serve as foundation for intercultural ethics:

- In microbiology, this refers to the cultivation and multiplication of microorganisms in a culture medium under controlled conditions to study them or use them for specific purposes.
- In botany, culture can be defined as the practice of growing plants under controlled conditions (e.g., in greenhouses or in vitro) to promote their development or to select certain characteristics.
- Behavioral biology uses the term in relation to the transmission of behaviors from one generation to the next through imitation or social interaction (e.g., tool use in chimpanzees or the song repertoire of songbirds).
- Within contemporary biological anthropology, culture refers to the totality of beliefs, values, traditions, and behaviors, as well as tangible and intangible artifacts.

It is obvious that in the following we will use the fourth type of definition as a hermeneutical framework, using it to guide the discussion of cultural evolution and the evolutionary ethics derived from it.

The Nature-Nurture Debate: Culture on the Biological Leash?

An extremely crucial question for biology is how much evolutionary significance should be attributed to human culture. This has occupied the scientific discourse in a highly controversial manner for well over forty years. In the early 1970s, a **nature-nurture debate** increasingly began to dominate the scientific discourse: on the one hand, the social sciences, which were very closely associated with behaviorism, emphasized that humans (and ultimately societies) were completely changeable. What ultimately makes a human into a human being is the social milieu, education, and culture.¹⁹ On the other side was sociobiology, which, due to its gene-centric approach, argued that the human mind and human behavior should be seen as the product of a “human nature” that had developed over the course of evolution.²⁰ Richard Dawkins, who attempted to qualify culture through two effective approaches, is the leading thinker in this field:

- **Thesis of memetic evolution** (1976): Adapting his idea of the “selfish gene,” he introduced the idea of the “selfish meme”: similar to genes reproducing themselves in a genetic race to pass on their own copies, he argues that ideas, behaviors, or cultural elements (called “memes”) are also in a race to spread and reproduce. A selfish meme is therefore a cultural element that aims to spread itself and thus maximize its own chances of survival, often at the expense of other ideas or memes and regardless of whether it is beneficial to its bearer or not.²¹
- **Extended phenotype thesis** (1982): The phenotype thus goes beyond the pure physiology of an organism: genes can manifest themselves through extracorporeal artifacts (such as beaver dams

¹⁹ Buskes, *Evolutionär denken*, 95.

²⁰ Buskes, *Evolutionär denken*, 96.

²¹ Buskes, *Evolutionär denken*, 171–173.

or bird nests), which increases their genetic fitness. The behavior of living beings should consequently also be counted as part of the phenotype. From this point of view, culture is nothing more than an extended effect of human genes and is ultimately interpreted as a purely biological phenomenon, because it is anchored exclusively in the genes.²²

The thesis that human cultural evolution is merely an extension of biological evolution, which is characterized by gene- or meme-centrism, has long been the dominant view in sociobiology.²³ It was not until around the mid-1990s that this began to increasingly corrode, as approaches favoring the idea of **gene-culture co-evolution** began to establish themselves and gain acceptance. The decisive factor here was the thesis of inclusive inheritance (briefly outlined above), with multi-level selection theory serving as the theoretical foundation. Inclusive inheritance explicitly assigns culture an independent creative potential within human evolution and decidedly emphasizes that it is not on the leash of biological evolution.

“Back to the Roots”: Morality as a Co-Product of Biological and Cultural Evolution

Embedded in this nature-nurture debate, the program of evolutionary ethics was established within the evolutionary-biological canon to explore the natural history of human morality. As early as *The Descent of Man* (1871), Darwin pursued the thesis that human moral ability is a product of natural and cultural evolution. His basic approach proves to be remarkably systemic: Darwin is essentially concerned with conceiving a theoretical framework that makes it possible to think of the human being

²² Buskes, *Evolutionär denken*, 174.

²³ It is interesting to note here that memetics in particular has left clear traces in our media landscape. As a representative example, see the world bestseller *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (Random House, 2014), by Yuval Harari, who uses this basic idea in his explanations, along with the common term “memes” (used on today’s social media platforms for images, videos, texts, or other media elements that can quickly spread virally).

in terms of the whole of living things without abandoning the specificity of the human being in cognitive and moral terms.²⁴ He thus refers to authorities from various philosophical schools (above all English-Scottish empiricism) and attempts to integrate their concepts as categorical building blocks into his naturalistic-evolutionary theory of descent.²⁵ Consequently, Darwin outlines human evolution not only in social terms but in cultural terms as well. The human being is a social and cultural animal.²⁶

- Due to continuous increases in mental capacity and the development of complex language systems that resulted from natural selection processes, a “moral sense” was able to evolve from the group of social instincts, enabling a qualitatively new, exclusive human capacity. This moral ability is not primarily acquired by blindly following social instincts, but rather by making conscious judgments and performing actions according to generally accepted principles.²⁷
- In addition, Darwin develops a group-selective approach to explain the continuous expansion of target groups (from small reference groups to state structures): communities with mutually supportive individuals would have prevailed over those with more selfish individuals. During evolution, this process has been repeated and extended to ever larger reference units that are ultimately intercultural.²⁸

²⁴ Eve-Marie Engels, “Charles Darwins evolutionäre Theorie der Erkenntnis- und Moralfähigkeit,” in *Charles Darwin und seine Wirkung*, ed. E.-M. Engels (Suhrkamp, 2009), 306.

²⁵ Eve-Marie Engels, *Charles Darwin* (Beck, 2007), 164–165.

²⁶ Frans De Waal, “Morally Evolved: Primates’ Social Instincts, Human Morality, and the Rise and Fall of Veneer Theory,” in *Primates and Philosophers: How Morality Evolved*, ed. S. Macedo and J. Ober (Princeton University Press, 2006), 22.

²⁷ Engels, “Charles Darwins evolutionäre Theorie der Erkenntnis- und Moralfähigkeit,” 325.

²⁸ Engels, *Charles Darwin*, 175.

For Darwin, culture represents a strikingly new factor, requiring a cultivation of the moral faculty that a mere increase in reproductive fitness could never have achieved.²⁹ In other words, he firmly assumes a co-evolution of nature and culture.

In contrast, about 90 years later, sociobiology focused on the gene-centric approach (outlined above) when it devoted itself to the program of evolutionary ethics: it limited itself exclusively to altruistic behavior in group-active animal species (including humans) by trying to interpret it within the horizon of the “selfish gene” theory, largely ignoring the “culture” aspect. Altruistic behavior as a decidedly “biological” phenomenon, which is based either on kin selection or on reciprocity principles between unrelated group members, serves solely to replicate certain genes that promote cooperative behavior and are therefore capable of survival. Here, mathematical game theory acted as a key hermeneutic discipline: reciprocal-altruistic social behavior is now described as investment-benefit calculations, whereby they ultimately only represent evolutionarily stable strategies of “selfish genes.”

In the mid-1990s, however, there was a decisive return to Darwin, with a renewed focus on humans as natural and cultural beings. Matt Ridley (b. 1958) is one of the pioneers in this field, and his game-theoretical approach falls short when it treats all altruistic behavior and ultimately human moral acts purely as cost-benefit calculations. It was the evolutionary genesis of corresponding emotions and social instincts that enabled the formation of simple relationship structures, leading to complex cultural communities, thereby providing the basis for cultural co-evolution. This correlated with the increase in brain volume during continuous adaptation to more complex social connections (in the sense of social intelligence).³⁰ Following on from this, Frans de Waal (1948–2024) finally qualifies humans as “essentially” moral cultural primates. In the following, he distinguishes three levels of morality in humans as compared to apes:

²⁹ Engels, “Charles Darwins evolutionäre Theorie der Erkenntnis- und Moralfähigkeit,” 326.

³⁰ Matt Ridley, *Die Biologie der Tugend: Warum es sich lohnt, gut sein*, trans. J. Weiland and A. Weiland (Ullstein, 1999), 179–209.

- *Level of moral feelings* (as a moral basis): Mammals showed empathic abilities early on in their evolution, which were initially limited to their relationship with their offspring. These eventually extended to other forms of relationships, especially in primates, where reciprocity tendencies, a sense of fairness, and the ability to harmonize relationships developed.³¹
- *Social pressure level* (in the context of group morality): This refers to simpler moral behaviors that are specific to small groups. These create social rules, which exert social pressure and influence the behavior of the members, thus promoting cooperation and the achievement of common goals. Apes also have a certain understanding of acceptable and unacceptable behavior and of prescriptive social rules, but these are crucially linked to immediate consequences (especially for themselves). In contrast, the human aspects of social pressure tend to emphasize the common good and are characterized by a right-wrong distinction that allows humans in the small group to take an impartial standpoint.³²
- *Level of moral reason* (in the context of cultural morality): This is exclusively human and addresses moral norms and values based on cultural traditions, beliefs, and institutions. These can vary from one society to the next. As a result, the individual develops an internal compass by which they evaluate themselves and others. De Waal emphasizes here that moral norms and values do not arise from maxims that are arrived at independently, but from interactions with others that have been internalized. Social-cultural interaction thus forms the basis of individual moral consideration.³³

³¹ Frans De Waal, "The Tower of Morality," in *Primates and Philosophers: How Morality Evolved*, ed. S. Macedo and J. Ober (Princeton University Press, 2006), 168–169.

³² De Waal, "The Tower of Morality," 169–172.

³³ De Waal, "The Tower of Morality," 173–175.

Although based on De Waal, Michael Tomasello pursues a more culturally adaptive approach. He identifies humans as ultra-cooperative and ultra-social primates³⁴ who have undergone an evolution of coexistence that includes new forms of cooperation and cultural organization. With his *deservingness hypothesis*, he builds a bridge between biologically-adapted altruistic and culturally-adapted norm-oriented behavior. Tomasello distinguishes between three stages of development to outline an evolution from purely strategic cooperation to “genuine” morality:

- *Individual intentionality*: The last common ancestor of humans and chimpanzees was largely dominated by individualistic behavior. Prosocial activities were conducted out of self-interest, and cooperative activities served mainly competitive purposes, so that others were used as social tools. Empathy was mainly shown to close relatives and coalition partners (“friends”).³⁵
- *Joint intentionality* (first-order shared intentionality): At least 400,000 years ago, early humans were forced into an ecological niche that required communal foraging (hunting of large animals). This led to strong interpersonal dependencies and a corresponding compassion for the well-being of potential partners. Early humans acted in a socially recursive manner and developed a “we” consciousness with individual role attributions: In view of joint obligations, the “I” is subordinated to the “you” as a second-personal entity and the partner is recognized as an equal second-personal actor. With the development of such a second-personal morality, the first rudiments of norms emerged.³⁶

³⁴ Michael Tomasello, *A Natural History of Human Morality* (Harvard University Press, 2016), 42.

³⁵ Tomasello, *A Natural History*, 143.

³⁶ Tomasello, *A Natural History*, 144–145.

- *Collective intentionality* (second-order shared intentionality): Around 100,000 years ago, modern humans began to live in large, organized cultural groups. This led to an increased dependence on the group and an orientation that placed group instructions above individual needs. In this way, increasingly complex systems of norms were passed on cumulatively. Modern humans must no longer generate individual social obligations themselves; rather, they are born into a complex of a pre-existing cultural reality of social obligations. There was a continuous transition from a dyadic-local to a universal-objective morality.³⁷

An Evaluative Outlook

Basically, two core results can be identified in relation to a bioscientific foundation, which reflects interdisciplinary events between epistemological scientific cultures and as an empirical-material reference level for intercultural ethics.

Interdisciplinarity as an Intercultural Process

In the course of their own scientific history, biologists developed into veritable masters of multi-interdisciplinary collaboration with the theory of evolution as a unifying foundation, without losing the individual characteristics of the respective disciplines. In other words, the individual disciplines represent subcultures within an epistemological cultural landscape, which enter into a relationship with each other via the connecting medium of basic evolutionary biological approaches, correct each other by means of the falsification principle that is inherent to them, and thus complement each other systemically as a biological canon. Their masterpiece is certainly the multi-level selection theory (presented above), which combines molecular biology and biochemistry with behavioral

³⁷ Tomasello, *A Natural History*, 145.

biology and cultural evolutionary research approaches in such an ingenious way.

It also reveals that the theory of symbolic transmission in particular stimulates bridges to disciplines in the humanities and cultural studies that have hardly been explored to date. In other words, this current bioscientific approach opens up an anthropological “meeting place” for epistemologically different scientific cultures, so that theological ethics, if it wants to define itself as an interculturally operating ethics, is also called upon to help build and consolidate these bridges in a learning-listening way. At this point, the theologian Walter Sparn (b. 1941) cites the need for a “cultural hermeneutic transformation”: a common horizon of possible communication is essential, which consists in the fact that all human behavior is ultimately cultural practice. Accordingly, “cultural” generally outlines the human processing of “natural” (such as biologically given) matters in and for a new space, which we refer to as culture. However, culture is never exclusively a matter of knowledge, increase and improvement, but always also a matter of understanding in the sense of a reflexive and perspectival relationship between the subjects of knowledge and the objects of their knowledge.³⁸ What is required is a kind of “hermeneutics of the foreign culture,” whereby difference is defined as something positive that represents a decidedly basic trigger for interdisciplinary familiarization, so that in the further course the “self” wants to open up again and again in the encounters with the other and now presents itself as something “dialogically changed.” By learning to understand each other, previously fixed attitudes and thought structures are broken down and recalibrated in the relationship with the other.

On the one hand, the life sciences inevitably take place in the medium of philosophical reflection when they evaluate their data and use them to falsify theoretical systems, and the basic biological concepts (such as

³⁸ Walter Sparn, “Lösen sich dogmatische Fixierungen auf? Transformationen kategorialer Grenzen in einer Offenbarungsreligion,” in *Glaube und Naturwissenschaft* [Theologie für die Praxis, 46. Jahrgang], ed. J. Barthel, R. Gebauer, H. Eschmann, and C. Voigt (Evangelische Verlagsanstalt 2020), 32.

“culture”) have emerged from philosophical language usage. On the other hand, theological ethics is in a constant process of differentiation and connection with philosophy. Therefore, philosophy can serve epistemologically as a “hermeneutic culture of mediation” in order to achieve a hermeneutic allocation and mediation of the theological-ethical and bioscientific dimension. This is precisely why it is extremely important for theological ethicists to display a sufficient knowledge of the history of the life sciences (as was attempted above). This is the only way to recognize the causes of one-sided conceptions and mutual misunderstandings or prejudices and is a prerequisite for overcoming them.³⁹

Both biosciences and theological ethics necessarily require an interdisciplinary approach. The latter requires the empirical information that the biosciences ultimately provide. Due to the deliberate methodological limitations of their own field of experience, biologists have the option of presenting their isolated theoretical systems as self-sufficient domains that can be assessed exclusively via empirical paths of knowledge. It should be emphasized here that evolutionary selection and adaptation are the key hermeneutical categories. Theological ethics, on the other hand, is not able to make the kind of material-specific contributions that take place in interbiodisciplinary contexts. At the same time, however, such a methodological reductionism also evokes an appropriateness to theological ethics—for example, when the spirituality and cultural nature of the human being is touched upon, which to a large extent eludes the special language and methodology of the biosciences. When theological ethics refers to human beings, it does so in a different context: it views them from a personal and community perspective of their goal in life, whereby this cannot be reduced to a mere biological existence.⁴⁰

³⁹ Matthias Haudel, *Theologie und Naturwissenschaft: Zur Überwindung von Vorurteilen und zu ganzheitlicher Wahrheitserkenntnis*, 2nd ed. (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2023), 42–43.

⁴⁰ Andreas Knapp, *Soziobiologie und Moralthologie: Kritik der ethischen Folgerungen moderner Biologie* (VCH Verlagsgesellschaft, 1989), 21.

The Bioscientific Foundation of an (Inter-)Cultural Ethics

As outlined above, there has been a significant paradigm shift in the biosciences, which also includes a change of perspective on how human culture is viewed. Thus, the purely gene-centered approach of sociobiology proved to be too short-sighted, since from a biological-systemic perspective, human beings are more than the mere sum of their genes and are therefore far too complex to describe or even interpret solely through a monocausal biologism. Accordingly, for contemporary evolutionary biology, human culture does not represent a mere epiphenomenon, as it ultimately promoted humans into a niche that enables the human species to exceed the limits of natural evolution. Rather, at this point we are deliberately referring to natural and cultural evolution, which on the one hand overlap and on the other hand offer specific development opportunities. Charles Darwin already pointed this out when he decidedly wanted to understand humans as natural and cultural beings. Using this as a basis, Michael Tomasello develops the idea of human evolution from a social to an ultrasocial primate: this unique ability of ultrasociality represents the foundation for a unique cultural evolution of humans. On the one hand, it enabled them to build up increasingly complex social structures (up to societies and cultures) and, on the other, to reach the intercultural level by expanding their own reference group to include an increasing number of relationships with members of alien groups, societies and cultures, as has become the status quo in our globalized existence today.

In addition, contemporary evolutionary ethics, as a sub-discipline of evolutionary biology, firmly identifies the moral capacity as a basic condition of human coexistence. In direct reference to Charles Darwin, the approaches of Frans de Waal and Michael Tomasello aim to outline an evolutionary biological anthropology that seeks to understand humans as fundamentally moral primates. From an evolutionary-ethical perspective, two developmental pathways can be identified regarding the genesis of human morality:

- **Morality of Compassion:** The abilities for empathy and altruistic behavior (toward both relatives and non-relatives) form the underlying foundation of human moral capacity as *natural-evolutionarily* developed traits.
- **Morality of Responsibility and Fairness:** Collectively generated systems of norms are *cultural-evolutionary* products of symbolic tradition and ultra-cooperative intentionality. They are fundamental to the development of human ultra-social existence, as they regulate individual behavior and play a crucial role in the construction of social identity. As Tomasello emphasizes, it is essential to recognize that these norms are not quasi-static “eternal truths” or entirely “genetically determined dispositions,” but rather cultural achievements that are passed down through generations, while also being subject to change and further development.

For an interculturally operating theological ethics, the latter approach is of particular importance, in that it refers decidedly to the evolutionary-dynamic character in the cultural generation of norm systems. In a nutshell: the evolution of norm systems reflects the vital transformation of social and cultural contexts. This approach can prove to be extremely valuable for a theological ethics that wants to understand itself as intercultural: in the face of a globally active Catholic Church and an increasingly globalized humanity, it is confronted with the enormous challenge of finding common ethical foundations and principles that apply across cultural boundaries on the one hand and respectfully reflect the particularities and inherent values of cultural and religious traditions (such as normative practice) on the other.

At some point, theological ethics is faced with the task of not simply adopting this evolutionary-biological foundation of an intercultural human condition into its system of thought without reflection. Precisely because evolutionary ethics, as a dedicated sub-discipline of evolutionary

biology, generates its findings solely by means of methodological naturalism (in the sense of a non-interventionist agreement) and thus excludes all non-empirically tangible facts from its investigations, it requires theological ethics, among other things, to expand its deliberately limited framework of knowledge. Theological ethics in particular should enter into a “critical-solidary” discourse partnership with it in order to limit the risk of simply deriving naturalistic ideologies from findings, as is the case in sociology, for example.



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14. From the Local to the Universal: Henry Odera Oruka's Vision of a Just World as Stimulus for an Intercultural Theological Ethics

Maria Haneder-Kulterer

Henry Odera Oruka as Pioneer of Modern African Philosophy

Born in Kenya in 1944, Henry Odera Oruka is an important pioneer of modern African philosophy.¹ He studied philosophy in Kenya, Sweden, and the United States. He began teaching at the University of Nairobi in 1970. At the beginning of his teaching assignment, he was confronted with many prejudices. His fellow professors, most of whom were priests and lay theologians, devalued African societies. Some regarded logical thinking as a special privilege of the West, as an Anglican British missionary suggested: "I do not think that logic is really a subject for the African mind. We in the West are familiar with it right from the days of Aristotle. The African mind, I believe, is intuitive, not logical."²

His philosophy of wisdom emerged as a reaction to these prejudices. He discovered and localized traditional African wisdom teachings as a philosophy, one that could challenge the claim, which he regarded as part of the racist-colonial tradition, that African systems of thought are closed, exclusively communal, and radically different from Western rational thinking, as Anke Graneß, who has studied his work in detail, points out.³

¹ This chapter is based on a master's thesis, which was written in the context of a different question. Maria Haneder-Kulterer, "Gerechtigkeit für die ganze Welt? Eine Auseinandersetzung mit dem Prinzip des Human Minimum und der Parental Earth Ethics von Henry Odera Oruka" (MA Thesis, University of Vienna, 2023).

² Henry Odera Oruka, *Sage Philosophy: Indigenous Thinkers and Modern Debate on an African Philosophy* (Brill, 1990), 3.

³ Anke Graneß, *Das menschliche Minimum: Globale Gerechtigkeit aus afrikanischer Sicht: Henry Odera Oruka* (Campus, 2011), 73.

In addition to Anke Graneß, Jonathan O. Chimakonam, Jacinta Mwendu Maweu, Michael Kamau Mburu and Oriare Nyarwath should also be mentioned here, who have dealt with Odera Orika and his work in recent years, particularly from an African perspective.⁴

For Odera Orika, the wisdom dimension of philosophy manifests itself in the ethical commitment of philosophers. He is convinced that philosophy and ethics should not simply be pursued as unrealistic sciences at universities but must be practical and contribute to the improvement of human life, to the transformation of societies, and to greater justice. "Philosophy is an art of reasoning and provides a critical intellectual weapon and methodology for analysing and synthesising the basic problems of man, society and nature. . . . The main function of moral and social philosophy is to apply rigorous analytic and synthetic reason to the basic moral and social problems and help explain or define moral good, moral evil and the requirements of humanist social order."⁵

The big questions of ethics, "What is a good life?" and "What should I do?" become a central theme in his research into his socially and politically marginalized African continent. Injustice must be reflected upon and morally evaluated, and new ideas to secure justice for all must be developed. He sees Africa's problems in a wider context, in the context of the entire world, and solutions must be found in dialogue on a global level. He advocates for an intercultural ethics, a dialogue between different ethical approaches, drawing on African wisdom philosophy and

⁴ Jonathan O. Chimakonam, "Is the Debate on Poverty Research a Global One? A Consideration of the Exclusion of Odera Orika's 'Human Minimum' as a Case of Epistemic Injustice," in *Dimensions of Poverty: Measurement, Epistemic Injustices, Activism*, ed. V. Beck (Springer Nature, 2020), 97–114; Jacinta Mwendu Maweu, "The Relevance of Odera Orika's Parental Earth Ethics as an Eco Philosophy," in *Odera Orika in the Twenty-first Century: Kenyan Philosophical Studies*, II, ed. R. M. J. Oduor, O. Nyarwath, and F. E. A. Owakah (The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2018), 303–313; Michael Kamau Mburu, *Odera Orika and the Right to a Human Minimum: An African Philosopher's Defense of Human Dignity and Environment* (Lexington Books, 2022); Oriare Nyarwath, "Oruka's Right to a Human Minimum as a Principle of Global Justice," in *Odera Orika in the Twenty-first Century*, 261–285.

⁵ Henry Odera Orika, *Practical Philosophy: In Search of an Ethical Minimum* (East African Education Publishers, 1997), 74.

indigenous knowledge from all cultures, as well as from Western philosophical models of thought.⁶

Based on his fundamental question of justice, which he understood as global justice, he developed two important ethical models, the idea of a “Human Minimum” and the “Parental Earth Ethics,” which still have much to say about the problems of the world today, and which can serve as a valuable impetus for intercultural theological ethics.

He therefore repeatedly addressed the political situation in Kenya in his writings and acted as a critic of the Kenyan regime. For this reason, he was also placed under house arrest and banned from publishing. All too soon, in December 1995, he died in a road accident in which he was run over by a lorry. The suspicion that a thinker critical of the regime had been disposed of could never be completely dispelled.⁷

This contribution focuses on Odera Oruka’s ethical models and his engagement with global justice, as well as the extent to which his ideas can provide valuable insights for intercultural theological ethics.

Odera Oruka’s Emphasis on Global Justice

Henry Odera Oruka is a pioneer in thinking about global justice. For him, justice is an ethical aspiration that transcends national borders. At the beginning, he advocates a radical approach to “socio-economic distributive justice,” which makes a morally normative claim. In this phase, he is convinced that global justice must be geared towards overcoming all injustices and that all resources and wealth in the world must be distributed equally to the entire world population.⁸ Global justice “requires equal distribution of the world’s wealth among its population, regardless of the national, racial, technological or geographical differences. It requires total eradication of inequality in the world.”⁹

⁶ Graneß, *Menschliches Minimum*, 98–100.

⁷ Graneß, *Menschliches Minimum*, 71.

⁸ Graneß, *Menschliches Minimum*, 104.

⁹ Odera Oruka, *Practical Philosophy*, 118.

Later he moves away from the idea of a fundamentally equal distribution of all resources and only calls for a “human minimum” to ensure a basic standard of living for all. He understands global justice as an ethically regulative principle that is valid for all people, no matter their nationality, and “that would form a base for an ethics that can help *ensure the practice of global justice* among the inhabitants of the globe regardless of the question of racial, national or geographical origins and political affiliations.”¹⁰ This principle is linked to demands, which he outlines as follows:

We need a principle which would make it *ethically obligatory* for affluent nations to aid poor ones as an unqualified moral duty for humanity, and for the latter to receive such aid without feeling a sense of *self-pity*. Such a principle should also help to invalidate the use of “national supererogation” in the relations between nations without thereby discrediting the principle of national sovereignty and the equality of nations. It should also be a principle from which any nation (however independent) that treats its citizens as “subhumans” would legitimately call for *humane* external interference in her internal affairs.¹¹

This thesis by Odera Orika could be seen as an interesting new way of thinking about humanitarian aid, as it was already discussed in the colonial debates of the sixteenth century as an ethics of humanitarian intervention. Later in this chapter, this topic will be discussed again with reference to Hans Schelkshorn, particularly in connection with key aspects of intercultural theological ethics.¹²

Oriare Nyarwath notes, in his analysis of Odera Orika, that his argument for a human minimum is focused on the fulfilment of global justice, which calls for normative principles that oblige rich nations and

¹⁰ Odera Orika, *Practical Philosophy*, 84, italics original.

¹¹ Odera Orika, *Practical Philosophy*, 84, quotation marks and italics original.

¹² Hans Schelkshorn, *Rethinking European Modernity: Reason, Power, and Coloniality in Early Modern Thought* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2024), 139–213.

individuals to care for the poor or disadvantaged.¹³ In short, all nations have “a global ethical obligation to humanity,”¹⁴ to help the poor in order to safeguard the rights and existence of individuals and entire states. This is regarded as a fundamental global obligation that must be demanded of states. It is not to be understood as historical reparations or international charity. Global justice is therefore a universally valid principle that makes it possible to access national wealth in favor of the world’s poor.¹⁵ To make this possible, he calls for all people to have a minimum level of security for the basic necessities of life, which he calls the “right to a human minimum.”¹⁶

The Right to a Human Minimum

Odera Oruka understands the human minimum as a basic right to an absolutely necessary subsistence minimum, which is a prerequisite for every person in the world to be able to live rationally and self-confidently. This fundamental right is only guaranteed, if it aims to secure specific basic needs enabling people to shape their lives creatively and act morally.

For all human beings to function with a significant degree of rationality and self-awareness, they need a certain minimum amount of physical security, health care, and subsistence . . . Below this minimum one may still be human and alive. But one cannot successfully carry out the functions of a moral agent or engage in creative activity. Access to at least the human minimum is necessary (even if not sufficient) for one to be rational and self-conscious. Without it, man is either a brute or a human vegetable; he loses the very minimum necessary for a decent definition of human being.¹⁷

¹³ Nyarwath, *Human Minimum as a Principle of Global Justice*, 264.

¹⁴ Odera Oruka, *Practical Philosophy*, 85.

¹⁵ Graneß, *Menschliches Minimum*, 106.

¹⁶ Odera Oruka, *Practical Philosophy*, 87.

¹⁷ Odera Oruka, *Practical Philosophy*, 87.

Odera Oruka sees these three basic rights—physical security, health care, and subsistence—as universal human rights because they are necessary to guarantee human life throughout the world and are not limited to a particular state. He refers to these three rights as “the inherent rights of persons,” which, as Mburu explains,¹⁸ means that their justification derives from human nature itself. This means a universal moral right, which is complemented by the obligation of every moral agent to ensure that the right to a human minimum is respected.¹⁹

There are conceptual ambiguities in connection with these three basic rights. At the beginning of his idea of the Human Minimum, in 1989, in the article “The Philosophy of Foreign Aid,”²⁰ in connection with the above-mentioned physical security, health care, and subsistence he speaks of three basic rights.²¹ Two years later, when he explains these in more detail in his essay “The Philosophy of Liberty”²² he speaks of the three basic (or primary) needs and develops them more precisely by distinguishing them from secondary or non-primary needs and by connecting them with freedom. The *primary needs*—those already mentioned above as basic rights, namely physical security, health care, and subsistence—are vital basic needs. In an expanded definition of basic needs, he describes more precisely what he means by subsistence. A subsistence level must ensure access to food, shelter, and clothing, as well as basic knowledge, the ability to move and act, and the practice of sexuality, which he considers a biological necessity for reproduction. He views reproduction as the foundation for the survival of a society and thus as something that must be guaranteed. In addition, he identifies the two further basic needs: health—which, in this more detailed definition, is also considered part of

¹⁸ Mburu, *Odera Oruka and the Human Minimum*, 71.

¹⁹ Odera Oruka, *Practical Philosophy*, 85–86.

²⁰ Henry Odera Oruka, “Philosophy of Foreign Aid,” in *Sagacious Reasoning: Henry Odera Oruka in memoriam*, ed. A. Graneß and K. Kresse (Peter Lang, 1997), 81–92.

²¹ Odera Oruka, *Philosophy of Foreign Aid*, 85.

²² Henry Odera Oruka, *The Philosophy of Liberty: An Essay on Political Philosophy* (Standard Textbooks Graphics and Publishing, 1991).

subsistence—and physical security, which he defines as the fundamental inviolability of human life.²³

The *secondary needs* serve further development and are not vital. What counts as a vital basic need and what counts as a secondary need varies depending on the context. Relevant for determining the difference are, for example, cultural circumstances or climatic conditions.²⁴ Secondary needs, which are common to all, include the ability to express oneself, to socialize with others, to have one's own opinion, to belong to a religion or no religion, to strive for culture and education, as well as sexual activity for pleasure. The fulfilment of basic needs always takes precedence over the fulfilment of secondary needs.²⁵

The right to a human minimum, the right to have the basic needs described above met, is an absolute right. It is a basic prerequisite for the fulfilment of all other rights. "[T]here is morally no other right of persons which can justifiably compromise its enforcement. Its fulfilment is the basic starting point for the exercise . . . of any other right. . . . [It] is the basis for a justified demand by anybody that the world (not just his society) has the duty to ensure that he is not denied a chance to live a basically healthy life."²⁶

With the demand for a human minimum, he wants to realize the principle of global justice. This is an important basic principle for global ethics, because only when the human minimum is secured, and when people are free from existential fears, can they participate in moral discourse, according to Odera Oruka.

Mburu points out that Odera Oruka's idea of global justice can only be realized if we humans embrace an ethic that understands the whole universe as a commonwealth, as Odera Oruka later expresses in his model of Parental Earth Ethics: "The earth is a common good for all." With the

²³ Odera Oruka, *Philosophy of Liberty*, 53–54; Graneß, *Menschliches Minimum*, 128.

²⁴ Odera Oruka, *Philosophy of Liberty*, 53–54.

²⁵ Odera Oruka, *Philosophy of Liberty*, 64–65.

²⁶ Odera Oruka, *Practical Philosophy*, 88.

right to a human minimum, everyone should have the same right to basic supply.²⁷

Henry Odera Oruka makes a universal claim in his ethics. At its core, Odera Oruka offers a global ethic that aims beyond the goal of human well-being to the preservation of the earth.²⁸ This claim is reinforced in his second ethical model, Parental Earth Ethics, with which he focuses on the preservation of the whole world and shows how poverty reduction, environmental protection, climate protection, and security policy are interlinked.

Parental Earth Ethics

Henry Odera Oruka first used the term “Parental Earth Ethics” in 1993 as the title of an essay²⁹ in which he analyzed Garrett Hardin’s “Lifeboat Ethics”—the “boat is full” idea. Hardin is of the opinion that the earth can no longer support population growth and therefore rejects famine aid from rich countries to poor countries. With the image of a full boat and millions of poor people floating next to it, he illustrates his claim that famine aid causes the population in poor countries to increase exponentially, often even in direct proportion to this aid, while rich countries endeavor to control their population growth.

Invoking his idea of a right to a human minimum, Odera Oruka develops a counterposition to Hardin’s theory. “The right to a human minimum does by definition impose a duty on every moral agent (no matter from what part of the globe) to help ensure that there are no human beings who lack the means to fulfil this right.”³⁰ The problem with Hardin’s theory is that he assumes there is only one boat and that there is no connection between the rich people in the boat and the poor people

²⁷ Odera Oruka, *Practical Philosophy*, 150; Mburu, *Odera Oruka and the Human Minimum*, 89.

²⁸ Graneß, *Menschliches Minimum*, 137.

²⁹ The title of the essay is “Parental Earth Ethics” and is quoted in Odera Oruka’s *Practical Philosophy*, 146–151.

³⁰ Odera Oruka, *Practical Philosophy*, 147.

floating around it. Odera Oruka challenges this and transforms the image of a single boat into several—some wealthy and many poor. The wealthy boats are closely linked to the poor boats, because rich countries have achieved a large part of their wealth at the expense of poor countries. If one boat sinks, it is highly likely that all the others will sink too. “If indeed all the poor boats sank, eventually the rich boats would also sink.”³¹

He moves on from the image of the boats to the image of a family, through which he attempts to depict the global dependency relationships even more clearly and to show how strongly everything in the world is interconnected: “I make the claim that the earth, or the world, is a kind of family unit in which the members have a kith and kin relationship with one another and the earth is a common wealth to all humanity.”³² However, people are not only connected with one another but are also dependent on all of nature—animals, plants, the earth as an ecosystem, and the entire cosmos—and nature is likewise dependent on people. “For human existence, the existence of all other members of the ecosystem (even microbes) is necessary, hence the great need for maintaining biodiversity and preservation of the environment.”³³

As humans could not exist without the diversity of nature and all other members of the ecosystem, Odera Oruka is looking for an ecophilosophical approach that recognizes the overall interrelationships of nature. At the center of his ecophilosophy is the “complex web of being,” the whole of nature, wherein everything living is part of a single network that is no longer anthropocentrically oriented.³⁴

He criticizes anthropocentric attitudes in philosophy and in religions, highlighting Christianity in particular as “the most anthropocentric religion of all.”³⁵ Philosophical ethicists in search of an environmental ethic have

³¹ Odera Oruka, *Practical Philosophy*, 147–148.

³² Odera Oruka, *Practical Philosophy*, 150.

³³ Odera Oruka, *Practical Philosophy*, 250.

³⁴ Henry Odera Oruka, “Ecophilosophy and the Parental Earth Ethics: On the Complex Web of Being,” in *Sagacious Reasoning: Henry Odera Oruka in memoriam*, ed. A. Graneß and K. Kresse (Peter Lang, 1997), 119.

³⁵ Odera Oruka, *Practical Philosophy*, 245.

found no support in Christianity, he notes. Biblical texts that place human beings at the center as the master of all nature are referenced by him, with the creation mandate in Genesis 1:28 cited as an example. For this reason, he states, ethicists have begun to look for ethical foundations in different traditions and cultures, in order to develop a holistic approach to environmental ethics that includes all living beings and nature as a whole.³⁶

He builds on the criticism of Christianity that has been emerging since the 1960s, according to which the biblical mandate to rule (Genesis 1:28) and the concept of human beings created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26) promote an anthropocentric view that ignores nature and is said to have contributed significantly to the ecological crisis. From today's perspective, Odera Oruka's position can be contrasted with the fact that Christianity is generally characterized by a moderate anthropocentrism, which does not understand human beings in the status of superiority and domination, but which sees them in their unique dignity with the responsibility to care for all people and the whole of creation.³⁷ Moreover, Pope Francis's environmental encyclical *Laudato Si'* contains numerous passages that refer to ecophilosophical approaches. This chapter will discuss this topic in more detail later.

Odera Oruka argues in favor of a holistic environmental ethic, according to which humans are one member of the universe among many and every being has a value in itself unconnected to any benefit it may confer on humanity. "We have one ethics, one morality for all the inhabitants of the globe, plus the globe itself. So, an action or a thing is ethically right when it tends to preserve the integrity, beauty and stability of the biotic community; it is wrong when it tends to do otherwise."³⁸

This is his concern with the Parental Earth Ethics, in which he elaborates on his ecophilosophical approach. Using the metaphor of a family with six

³⁶ Odera Oruka, *Practical Philosophy*, 245.

³⁷ Richard N. Rwiza, *Environmental Ethics in the African Context* (CUEA Press, 2021), 106; Markus Vogt, *Christliche Umweltethik. Grundlagen und zentrale Herausforderungen* (Herder 2021), 52–54.

³⁸ Odera Oruka, *Practical Philosophy*, 244.

children, he explains the interdependence in our world. “Two of the children are relatively rich and four generally poor. . . . The reason for the differences in wealth have to do partly with the family history, partly with personal luck, and partly with individual talents.”³⁹ In addition to these personal differences, all children also have something in common. The most fundamental thing they have in common is their common origin—i.e., their parents. “The other factor they have in common is that each of them has his or her status and achievement based upon the tutelage that the family as a whole provided. Some made better use of that tutelage, while others may have squandered it.”⁴⁰

The family has always been governed by unwritten ethical laws, on which individual relationships with the family are based, and which can be summarized by two principles: 1) the parental debt (or bound) principle (PP), and 2) the individual luck principle (IP).⁴¹ The first principle involves kinship debt and the obligation to contribute to the well-being of all. Fortune and misfortune are closely linked to family history. This principle is based on four interrelated rules:

- 1a) *The Family Security Rule* ensures that every family member can always ask for support when they need it.
- 1b) *The Kinshipshame Rule*⁴² stipulates that the living conditions of each family member have an influence (both materially and emotionally) on all the others.
- 1c) *The Parental Debt Rule* emphasizes that no one is solely responsible for their wealth or poverty, because this is at least partly related to family history.

³⁹ Odera Oruka, *Practical Philosophy*, 148.

⁴⁰ Odera Oruka, *Practical Philosophy*, 148.

⁴¹ Odera Oruka, *Practical Philosophy*, 148.

⁴² “*The Kinshipshame Rule*, which states that the life conditions of any one member of the family affects all of them, both materially and emotionally, so that none of the members can reasonably be proud of his situation, however ‘happy,’ if any member of the family tree lives in decadence.” Odera Oruka, *Practical Philosophy*, 149, emphasis original.

- 1d) *Individual and Family Survival* obliges every member of the family to follow the first three rules and allows them to interfere with a member's property if they ignore the rules.⁴³

The second principle emphasizes individual happiness and ensures that each person has individual freedom of choice over their life and possessions. It regulates the possibility of personal enrichment (*The Personal Achievement Rule*), the free decision about personal property (*The Personal Supererogation Rule*), and subjects everyone to a public family law (*The Public Law Rule*).⁴⁴

If the rules of both principles conflict with each other, then the "Parental Debt Principle" always takes precedence over the "Individual Luck Principle," because the pursuit of individual happiness and prosperity is always subordinate to the state of the family unit and personal wealth is only partially at one's private disposal.⁴⁵ "The fate and security (physical or welfare) of each member of a family is ultimately bound up with the existential reality of the family as a whole."⁴⁶

According to Odera Oruka, these principles apply to the world, and the world, in which all inhabitants are related to each other, is best captured by the metaphor of the family. On this model, Planet Earth itself is to be seen as a common good for all people. That is the basic principle for everything.⁴⁷ Odera Oruka's aim is to adopt the principles of Parental Earth Ethics for a global ethic. He proposes that all rich and powerful nations pay into a pool that benefits the rest of the world. He calls this a "parental earth insurance policy," a kind of insurance for the earth.⁴⁸ He calls for laws to limit overconsumption and to ensure the survival of underconsumers: "Nations and international organizations should make laws to help limit the overconsumption of this proportion of mankind and

⁴³ Odera Oruka, *Practical Philosophy*, 148–149; Graneß, *Menschliches Minimum*, 142.

⁴⁴ Odera Oruka, *Practical Philosophy*, 149.

⁴⁵ Graneß, *Menschliches Minimum*, 143.

⁴⁶ Odera Oruka, *Practical Philosophy*, 148.

⁴⁷ Odera Oruka, *Practical Philosophy*, 150.

⁴⁸ Odera Oruka, "Ecophilosophy," 129.

to enhance the chances of the hungry one-third of the population (the underconsumers) of obtaining adequate food and water. . . . We need to protect consumers against the dictates of the producer and supplier. We also need to protect the excessive consumer against the pseudo-demands of his/her own appetite.”⁴⁹

In short, Odera Oruka advances an ethic of moderation and modesty, and Parental Earth Ethics represents this type of ethics. It is a basic ethic that can create the foundations for a just world.⁵⁰ It is an environmental ethic, in the sense that it aims for global environmental protection, and it is a social ethic, in the sense that it advocates for a global redistribution of wealth. And as consumer ethics, it can be an ethical framework “to help ensure a moral duty of both the superconsumers and underconsumers in a united world order.”⁵¹ In a “complex web of being,” as Odera Oruka understands it, ecological thinking, consumer behavior, and social theories are closely interwoven and cannot be separated from one another.⁵²

Values for All: Human Minimum and Parental Earth Ethics as Pathways to Global Justice

With Parental Earth Ethics, Odera Oruka develops the idea of the human minimum further and supplements his arguments in favor of it. His aim is to provide a convincing justification for why the rich are obliged to help the poor. The “parental debt (bound) principle” (i.e., the principle of kinship debt) is intended to oblige people to take mutual responsibility for the well-being of all. According to this principle, it is possible for the disadvantaged to demand support and help from the wealthy if their own survival, or that of the group, is at risk. With the “individual and family survival rule,” the fourth rule of the “parental debt principle,” he ensures that the industrious have the opportunity to acquire resources that idle

⁴⁹ Odera Oruka, *Practical Philosophy*, 265.

⁵⁰ Odera Oruka, *Practical Philosophy*, 150.

⁵¹ Odera Oruka, *Practical Philosophy*, 266.

⁵² Graneß, *Menschliches Minimum*, 144.

relatives overlook. This appropriation is morally justified if it serves the common good and does not contribute to an excessive personal enrichment of individuals, which he explains through the second principle of individual luck. However, if concerns for the common good collide with demands for personal happiness or property, the common good takes precedence over personal happiness.⁵³ The right to a human minimum cannot be overridden by a right to property, as Oriare Nyarwath observes: "For him [Odera Oruka], the right to property ought not to be treated as giving one an exclusive right over the resources in one's possession."⁵⁴ There is no absolute and exclusive right to personal property. The right to a human minimum must be fulfilled for all people before personal property rights are recognized.

With these two ethical models, Odera Oruka represents an ethic that—as Anke Graneß also interprets it—lays claim to universal validity. He is concerned with the preservation of the world: the entirety of existence is closely interlinked and manifests itself concretely in the individual areas of poverty reduction and environmental policy.⁵⁵ The fight against poverty, which is his primary concern in developing his account of the human minimum, is in addition closely linked to security policy, which is not possible independently of the other fields. As a basic ethic, Parental Earth Ethics integrates ecological thinking and a commitment to social justice into a single unit and thus makes a claim that must be considered and discussed globally. His ethics can only be realized within the global community; it is a global ethic. The overarching theme of his reflections is encapsulated in his Parental Earth Ethics, which frames all political and economic issues in Africa, and which motivates his tireless commitment to justice "within the context of a whole world" conceived of as a "complex web of being." Central to his thinking is the interconnectedness of

⁵³ Odera Oruka, *Practical Philosophy*, 149.

⁵⁴ Nyarwath, "Oruka's Right to a Human Minimum," 276.

⁵⁵ Graneß, *Menschliches Minimum*, 116.

everything on Earth.⁵⁶ It is not possible to separate the local from the global.

Impulses for Intercultural Theological Ethics

The previous discussions have shown that a key concern for Odera Oruka is to promote greater justice on a global level, which necessitates an intercultural and international exchange of ideas. Crossing cultural horizons is essential for this endeavor to succeed. Therefore, this chapter will now address the question of what principles can be derived from Odera Oruka's ethical models for an intercultural theological ethics. The following guidelines aim to provide possible conversation and discussion points for further thinking about intercultural issues.

Appreciation and Recognition of Local Traditions and Values, and Bringing Them into a Global Dialogue with One Another

Odera Oruka expresses this appreciation by examining and validating traditional African wisdom teachings—passed down through oral traditions—as philosophical doctrines that are of equal value to written philosophical schools of thought. He advocates for an intercultural ethics characterized by appreciation, recognition, and dialogue among different ethical perspectives. This includes African wisdom philosophy and indigenous knowledge from all cultures, as well as Western philosophical models.⁵⁷

For Jacinta Mwendu Maweu, a Kenyan philosopher, this remains equally relevant today. In the context of global climate change, she argues that efforts must be made to integrate and anchor indigenous knowledge within the “global village” to dismantle the notion that Western-oriented

⁵⁶ Graneß, *Menschliches Minimum*, 137.

⁵⁷ Graneß, *Menschliches Minimum*, 98–100.

knowledge systems are the only valid approach to the global environmental crisis.⁵⁸

The lesson that can be drawn from this approach to intercultural theological ethics is that we should appreciate, attend to, and be open towards all cultural, religious, and indigenous local traditions around the world, regardless of whether they are transmitted orally or in writing, or whether they are taught at universities or lived and experienced by people in their daily lives. This approach requires an attitude of listening and learning, as well as engaging others as equal and enriching dialogue partners on a global level, in order to collectively discuss valuable ethical questions and gain insights.

From a theological and ethical perspective, there are interesting points of reference in Pope Francis's encyclical *Laudato Si'*, where he writes that

it is essential to show special care for indigenous communities and their cultural traditions. They . . . should be the principal dialogue partners, especially when large projects affecting their land are proposed. For them, land is not a commodity but rather a gift from God and from their ancestors who rest there, a sacred space with which they need to interact if they are to maintain their identity and values. When they remain on their land, they themselves care for it best. (no. 146)

The Living Conditions of People as a Starting Point

For Odera Oruka, philosophical inquiry and ethical reflection always begin with individual people and their living conditions. The foundation of all his thinking lies in the problems of his continent and the peoples who live there. Ethics must engage with the "urgent questions of the present"⁵⁹ everywhere in the world. He believes that mere abstract philosophizing in the ivory towers of universities lacks legitimacy and relevance. In his

⁵⁸ Jacinta Mwende Maweu, "Gleichheit, Differenz und Komplementarität afrikanischer und westlicher Philosophie," in *Polylog denken: Überlegungen zu einer interkulturell-philosophischen Minimalregel*, ed. F. Gmainer-Pranzl and B. Saal (Facultas, 2018), 284.

⁵⁹ Graneß, *Menschliches Minimum*, 352.

engagement with traditional wisdom teachings, he discovers that this wise dimension of philosophy manifests itself in the ethical commitment of philosophers. As a practical philosophy, ethics must confront lived realities, injustices, and consequences, seeking values and principles on a moral level and applying them in specific social and political contexts to improve living conditions. He describes the goal as transforming society toward greater justice in the world.⁶⁰

One motivation for intercultural ethics could be to engage with concrete living conditions, as well as current global challenges such as climate change and social justice, to develop pragmatic solutions. Ethics should be practically applicable in daily life—the responsibility of the individual and the community is central to theological ethics, particularly with regard to the commitment to social justice and the principle of neighborly love. Here too, *Laudato Si'* could be used as a dialog partner, which Markus Vogt describes as a source of inspiration for the church as a change agent.⁶¹

Global Justice as a Universally Valid Ethical Principle

Reflecting on and seeking justice is the central concern of Odera Oruka's thought. By highlighting the profound interconnections in the world and the shared responsibility that everyone has for realizing justice, he argues that justice can only be conceived on a global scale. For Odera Oruka, global justice is an ethical principle that transcends national regulations and imposes a moral obligation on all individuals and states to assist others. It is a universally valid ethical principle that aims to ensure access to national wealth for the benefit of the poor across the world. The principle of global justice imposes an unconditional duty to assist and affirms an absolute right for those in need of receiving help.⁶²

⁶⁰ Odera Oruka, *Practical Philosophy*, 74.

⁶¹ Vogt, *Christliche Umweltethik*, 260.

⁶² Odera Oruka, *Practical Philosophy*, 82.

A fundamental question for intercultural theological ethics is what this radical demand amounts to, and how the absolute right of individuals to receive help can be practically realized in different contexts. Understanding global justice as a universally valid ethical principle could provide an important foundation for actively focusing on a more just world, as well as raising awareness of global injustices—recognizing and acknowledging them and reflecting on their interconnections and potential solutions.

As noted earlier, Odera Oruka's thought can be understood as a different variant of humanitarian aid, as discussed within the theological tradition in the sixteenth century. Based on Hans Schelkshorn's investigations, Francisco de Vitoria should be mentioned here, who was an important representative of the just war theory and who laid the foundation for a modern, global cosmopolitanism in his *Relectiones de Indis* at the beginning of the modern era. Vitoria significantly contributed to the development of international law with his conception of the law of nations. He expands the horizon of moral responsibility to encompass all of humanity, from which the idea of humanitarian intervention to save the innocent arises. Vitoria's vision is of a global society based on partnership and communication that connects individuals. His thinking relates to an inter-state order based on international law and a cosmopolitan ethics that transcends the boundaries of state sovereignty.⁶³

The principle of the common good in *Laudato Si'* should also be highlighted here as a point of reference to Odera Oruka's thesis from a theological perspective. For Pope Francis the principle of the common good is based on respect for human dignity and inalienable rights, promoting integral development. It encompasses societal welfare, the role of intermediate groups—especially the family—and the principle of subsidiarity. Additionally, it requires social peace, stability, and distributive justice. Both society as a whole and the state in particular have a duty to uphold and promote the common good. For Pope Francis, the principle

⁶³ Schelkshorn, *Rethinking European Modernity*, 207–208.

of the common good must be transformed directly into an appeal for solidarity and a preferential option for the poorest, which means drawing the consequences from the common destination of the earth's goods. In the option for the poorest, he sees a fundamental ethical requirement for an effective realization of the common good (*Laudato Si'*, nos. 156–158).

The Right to a Human Minimum as an Absolute Right for All

The right to a human minimum is deeply connected to the principle of global justice. Such a minimum ensures the basic needs of individuals for self-preservation and serves as the foundation for their capacity to act freely and morally as rational and self-aware beings. This right allows for and justifies access to national and even private property in cases where it concerns the survival of others, as it is an absolute right that takes precedence over property rights.

With this concept, Henry Odera Orika advocates for an egalitarian, distributive ethics. It is egalitarian because the right to basic provision is afforded to every person equally, and it is distributive because he views the unequal distribution of goods as a primary problem that needs to be addressed through redistribution.⁶⁴

How this existence minimum could be conceived and implemented on a global scale remains largely open in Odera Orika's work. This should serve as an impetus for intercultural theological ethics to further engage with the concept of the human minimum—for example, by exploring the idea that this is an absolute right that belongs to all people everywhere, which to the right to property is subordinate, and examining how it can be addressed in different situations and contexts. This approach could be brought into dialogue with other perspectives and traditions to expand on it and discuss potential solutions for the major problems of our time—such as poverty, hunger, war, and the climate crisis.

⁶⁴ Graneß, *Menschliches Minimum*, 114.

With his discussion on the human minimum, Odera Oruka addresses themes that also have a place in the theological-ethical tradition. A point of reference from a theological perspective can be found in Thomas Aquinas, who, in the context of the discussion on virtues associated with justice, distinguishes between a legal and a moral debt or duty (*debitum*), as described by Stephen Theron.⁶⁵

In the *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas Aquinas presents a table of inclinations, which are often interpreted as stemming from a fundamental tendency toward individual self-preservation. These inclinations include those toward “sexual intercourse and founding a family, to what is most specific to man, viz. the intellectual tendencies to such things as knowing the truth about God and living in society.”⁶⁶ An intercultural theological ethics could strive to create a framework for examining the relationship between Thomas Aquinas’s concept of natural inclinations and Henry Odera Oruka’s hierarchy of basic and secondary needs. This exploration aims to investigate the extent to which these two philosophical frameworks share connections in their understanding of essential human needs and ethical considerations.

Parental Earth Ethics as a Basis for a Holistic Environmental and Social Ethics

Parental Earth Ethics is an ecocentric, holistic environmental ethics that views humans as one among many members of the universe, with each being possessing intrinsic value independent of its utility to humans. As a foundational ethics, it links the fight against poverty and the fair distribution of the Earth’s resources with environmental considerations. The principles of Parental Earth Ethics are, on the one hand, crucial for establishing a human minimum for all people, and on the other hand, they can guide an ecophilosophical approach to addressing the current global

⁶⁵ Stephen Theron, *Thomas Aquinas on Virtue and Human Flourishing* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018), 91.

⁶⁶ Theron, *Thomas Aquinas*, 105.

environmental crisis. The “parental debt principle” describes a relationship of dependency among all members of this planet, which includes all of nature.

Maweu interprets the Parental Earth Principle today as asserting that the security of all on this planet and the obligation to address environmental issues take precedence over the selfish pursuit of human progress at the expense of other members of this Earth, whether they are human or another part of nature.⁶⁷

A central aim of this model for intercultural theological ethics is to embrace Odera Oruka’s view of the world as a “complex web of being.” This means moving away from a selfish, anthropocentric way of thinking, as Odera Oruka sees it promoted by Christianity in particular, based on the creation mandate—which was interpreted as a mandate to rule—and developing a holistic view that acknowledges the comprehensive interconnections of all existence. Markus Vogt notes that a critical rethinking of the ethics of creation in the light of the ecological crisis is only just beginning and, from the perspective of a Christian ethics of creation, he proposes an anthroporelational approach in which humans, as subjects of responsibility, recognize the intrinsic value of animals, plants and ecosystems.⁶⁸

In his environmental encyclical *Laudato Si’*, Pope Francis also criticizes a great anthropological lack of moderation in the modern age and points out that an “inadequate presentation of Christian anthropology gave rise to a wrong understanding of the relationship between human beings and the world” and argues in favor of understanding people as responsible stewards of the universe. And like Odera Oruka with his idea of the universe as a “complex web of being,” Pope Francis writes “everything is connected,” by which he means that everything—human beings, nature, the universe—is interrelated. Pope Francis also agrees with Odera Oruka in saying that we can only heal our relationship with nature if we also heal

⁶⁷ Maweu, “The Relevance of Odera Orukas’s Parental Earth Ethics,” 311–312.

⁶⁸ Vogt, *Christliche Umweltethik*, 53–54, 187.

all fundamental human relationships. He points out that the appreciation of nature and the environment is inseparable from the appreciation of every human person. Thus, hearing the cries of nature is closely linked to recognizing the value of a poor person, for example. Social responsibility and ecological thinking are closely linked (*Laudato Si'*, nos. 116–124). He is convinced that “a true ecological approach *always* becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear *both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor*” (*Laudato Si'*, no. 49). This connects him to Odera Oruka's thesis, that social issues and the environmental crisis are closely intertwined, and that a solution to one cannot be achieved without addressing the other.

Moral Universality

Moral universality implies that intercultural dialogue must strive for commonalities and convergence—at the level of legal and moral rights and at the level of moral principles and values. The three fundamental rights—physical safety, healthcare, and subsistence—that Oruka uses to describe the human minimum are understood by him as universal human rights, as they are considered absolute necessities for the survival of individuals everywhere in the world. They are essential for the functioning of a person. Since these basic rights are regarded as universal, every morally capable individual has an obligation to ensure that the right to a minimum is upheld.⁶⁹

Odera Oruka advocates universal ethical principles that must transcend cultural boundaries. An intercultural theological ethics should engage with these three fundamental, universal rights, exploring their precise definitions, assessing their universality, and identifying additional shared values that should serve as a foundation for a more just world. In this regard, Odera Oruka's thought provides a valuable stimulus for diverse ethical approaches.

⁶⁹ Odera Oruka, *Practical Philosophy*, 85–87.

Conclusion

The above-mentioned ideas and suggestions should be used to engage in an intercultural dialogue with Odera Oruka's ethics, though they do not claim to be exhaustive. They are intended to encourage intercultural theological ethics to engage with this exceptional philosopher, who thought globally and interculturally from the early 1980s until his death in 1995. His ethical models—the human minimum and Parental Earth Ethics—particularly emphasize global justice, and therefore universal claims of ethics. Starting from the challenges of his marginalized continent, he developed a universal vision and situates African philosophy at eye-level with Western traditions. His ideas remain remarkably relevant today, more than thirty years later. A deeper exploration of his work from this perspective would be desirable and could yield valuable insights.



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15. Intercultural Ethics and Institutions: Challenges and Possibilities

Andrea Vicini, SJ

In his 1951 book *Christ and Culture*, the Protestant theologian H. Richard Niebuhr reflects on both titular subjects, Christ and culture. He defines culture as “the total process of human activity,”¹ “the social heritage,”² and “human achievement”³ in the areas of “language, habits, ideas, beliefs, customs, social organization, inherited artifacts, technical processes, and values.”⁴ Such a “*world of values*,”⁵ which are good, long to be realized both in temporal and in material ways, while striving to conserve values in pluralist contexts.⁶

In discussing various ways in which Christians have sought to live faithfully as disciples of Christ as they interact with cultures, Niebuhr proposes a typology that depends on three approaches:

- opposition to culture (Christ against culture),
- agreement between Christ and culture (the Christ of culture),
- and a combination that incorporates insights from both of these two views (Christ above culture).

Within the third framework Niebuhr highlights three variations:

- a synthetic type that sees Christ as the fulfillment of culture,

¹ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (Harper, 1951), 32.

² Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 33.

³ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 33.

⁴ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 32.

⁵ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 34, emphasis original.

⁶ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 34–39.

- a dualistic type that sees an ongoing tension between Christ and culture,
- and a conversionist type that portrays Jesus as the converter of culture and society.

Niebuhr's framework continues to inspire and guide a critical assessment of intercultural modalities and their dynamics. His Christological focus is essential, but it appears to undermine a broader attention that should be given to moral agents, the Church, communities, and institutions. This volume shows how further approaches are possible and even needed. In diverse ways, the previous chapters explore how to engage in intercultural theological ethics, which requires us to focus on moral agents and their agency understood in multiple ways. At the same time, institutions play a crucial role in fostering or inhibiting intercultural ethical interactions and dynamics. Their roles, responsibilities, challenges, and limitations further deepen the focus on moral agents and their agency, as well as on their relational interactions and the intercultural processes they embody, facilitate, or inhibit. This concluding chapter critically examines institutions and structures, especially in relationship to moral agents and their agency.

Moral Agents

First, in fostering intercultural theological ethics, initial attention could be given to scholars and authority figures, like theologians and bishops in the Catholic Church, by considering them as privileged interlocutors. Because of their training, commitments, and responsibilities,⁷ they are positioned to be and become facilitators of intercultural interactions or, regrettably, inhibitors. Together with training, experience matters. Being exposed to

⁷ On responsibility, see H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy* (Harper & Row, 1978); William Schweiker, "Responsibility and Moral Realities," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 22, no. 4 (2009): 472–495.

diverse cultural, religious, and socio-political contexts is an incentive to rediscover one's cultural identity, with its own specificities and limitations. One can reappropriate one's story with its cultural markers but also examine one's assumptions and experiences critically by questioning previously unchallenged presuppositions. At the same time, such exposure creates proximity with contexts encountered as "other." We discover similarities and differences, striving to appreciate their history and ongoing implications.

The fecundity of these displacements and interactions depends on the willingness to generously (but critically) examine one's cultural context and the humble openness to encounter another cultural reality with open eyes and intellectual benevolence, avoiding preconceptions and rushed judgments. What this process presupposes is embodying one's identity—socially, politically, and historically—in ways that make possible, and even facilitate, the encounter with the other. Hence, the truth about oneself and one's own culture leads to encountering truthfully another cultural context. In both cases one realizes that these truths are multilayered and evolving because of the dynamisms of both one's identity and other cultures.⁸

However, everything that inhibits the truthful recognition of one's identity and the hospitable encounter with another culture will complexify or compromise intercultural interactions. The wrongful assumption that truth about oneself and the other can be owned, controlled, and manipulated reflects an understanding of truth that is propositional rather than relational. In Christianity, the truth that encompasses all truths is Jesus, and believers relate to Jesus as the truth (John 14:6). Jesus cannot be owned, controlled, or manipulated. One's relationship to their own truth and cultural realities influences

⁸ See Bernard J. F. Lonergan, "The Transition from a Classicist World-View to Historical-Mindedness," in *A Second Collection: Papers by Bernard J. F. Lonergan, S.J.*, ed. W. F. J. Ryan and B. Tyrrell (University of Toronto Press for Lonergan Research Institute of Regis College, 1996), 1–10.

intercultural dynamics, as seen in instances where scholars and authority figures inhibit rather than foster intercultural endeavors.

Furthermore, historically, theology in general and moral theology in particular were fields reserved to clergy, whether diocesan or religious priests.⁹ This reality is still present in most of the world. In many places theology is not yet considered an academic discipline that deserves to be taught in non-confessional universities. Moreover, the limited working opportunities in ecclesial academic institutions are mostly reserved to clergy. A few national exceptions are notable—in the United Kingdom, Austria, Germany, and the United States—where theology holds the rank of academic discipline and where theology is taught in colleges and universities alongside the many other formative academic disciplines which characterize the humanities, as well as the social and natural sciences. Notably, questions, concerns, challenges, and experiences of lay people trained as theologians and engaged in the academy as teachers and scholars differ from those of clergy and religious. Hence, even simply focusing on moral agents, it becomes clear that the institutional settings—or their absence—in which these agents live, work, teach, and publish significantly influence the opportunities for fruitful intercultural immersion and exchange, or greatly constrain them. Authentic intercultural exchange requires identifying and naming missing voices and experiences that are silenced and striving to create conditions that might allow for further recognition and integration.¹⁰

⁹ See Charles E. Curran, *History and Contemporary Issues: Studies in Moral Theology* (Continuum, 1996); Charles E. Curran, *Catholic Moral Theology in the United States: A History* (Georgetown University Press, 2008); James F. Keenan, *A History of Catholic Moral Theology in the Twentieth Century: From Confessing Sins to Liberating Consciences* (Continuum, 2010); James F. Keenan, *A History of Catholic Theological Ethics* (Paulist Press, 2022); John Mahoney, *The Making of Moral Theology: A Study of the Roman Catholic Tradition* (Clarendon Press and Oxford University Press, 1987); Marciano Vidal, *Historia de la Teología Moral* (Perpetuo Socorro Editorial, 2012–2017).

¹⁰ As examples, see Justin Forbes and Katherine M. Douglass, “Disrupting Ecclesial Norms: Emerging Findings from the Missing Voices Project,” *Theology Today* 79, no. 3 (2022): 272–277; M. Adams Jared, “Missing Voices of Ecofeminism in Environmental Governance: Consequences and Future Directions,” *Ethics & the Environment* 28, no. 1 (2023): 55–74; Bryan Massingale, “The Systematic Erasure of the Black/Dark-Skinned Body,” in *Catholic Theological Ethics, Past, Present,*

These institutional constraints, which depend on existing academic and political choices, affect theology, the academy, and civil society by ensuring the limited impact and marginal influence of theological discourse, education, and formation, as well as social collaborative engagements informed by theologians and by the whole field of theology.¹¹ This loss has negative social consequences. By its nature, theological ethics is an interdisciplinary discipline that engages philosophy, social and natural sciences, anthropology, sociology, and political science—just to name a few. Theological ethics, through dialogue and collaborations, fosters mutual disciplinary enrichment. The current academic and social settings where theology is part of the academic and social fabric benefit from this very inclusion. Theology forms moral agents, engages multiple disciplines, and strives to promote the common good in the civic arena.

Theologically, in today's pluralist and multireligious world, the mystery of the Incarnation invites us to an inclusive approach that is not limited to hierarchical figures, but that at its core relies and depends on the experiences and competence of diverse moral agents. Theologians should not situate themselves apart from the culture in which they live and from what is happening in today's world. Moreover, academic and social transformations should heighten their presence within the social fabric. As an academic discipline, theological ethics cares about what is happening to God's people, loved by God and with whom God relates. Theological ethicists focus on people's challenges, struggles, and practices, and join

and Future: The Trento Conference, ed. J. F. Keenan (Orbis Books, 2012), 116–123; Antonio Moser, “Trent: The Historical Contribution and the Voices That Went Unheard,” in Keenan, *Catholic Theological Ethics, Past, Present, and Future*, 96–106; Anne Nasimiyu-Wasike, “The Missing Voices of Women,” in Keenan, *Catholic Theological Ethics, Past, Present, and Future*, 107–115; Nyambura J. Njoroge, “The Missing Voice: African Women Doing Theology,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 99 (1997): 77–83; Annie Selak, “Missing Voices in *Amoris Laetitia*: An Examination of Law, Narrative, and Possibilities for Inclusion in Roman Catholic Church Teaching,” *Journal of Catholic Social Thought* 16, no. 1 (2019): 83–102.

¹¹ “Civil society is that network of organizations larger than the family but smaller than the national government that help organize daily life.” Daniel K. Finn, *Christian Economic Ethics: History and Implications* (Fortress Press, 2013), 208.

others in their efforts to address multilayered social needs in the diverse cultural contexts in which citizens and believers live.

The Catholic theologian David Hollenbach has stressed how existing “polycentric governance and networking”¹² add complexity to the role and function of institutions in today’s globalized world. For Hollenbach, “Promoting the common good in its fullness will require working together in networks that cross local and national boundaries and also bridge the divisions that often separate business, government, and civil society.”¹³ Hence, such a “network of crisscrossing communities,”¹⁴ he continues, “will help overcome the divisions that today drive some groups into conflict and that leave far too many with no social support at all.”¹⁵ Both individual agency and institutions should foster solidarity and strive for greater social justice.

For the Catholic theologian James Keenan, further attention should be given to collectives as moral agents, which “are more than the sum of the persons involved”¹⁶ and have institutional, structural, and systemic influence. Collectives can be virtuous, promoting the agency of groups and their agendas and fostering social change, or they can be vicious, “like those that are racist, sexist, or homophobic, as well as morally ambiguous collectives (like many populist movements).”¹⁷ Hence, the attention given to identifying the social dimension of sin benefits from a more careful

¹² David Hollenbach, SJ, “The Glory of God and the Global Common Good: Solidarity in a Turbulent World,” *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 72 (2017): 56.

¹³ Hollenbach, “The Glory of God and the Global Common Good,” 57.

¹⁴ Hollenbach, “The Glory of God and the Global Common Good,” 57. Quoted in David Hollenbach, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 229.

¹⁵ Hollenbach, “The Glory of God and the Global Common Good,” 57.

¹⁶ James F. Keenan, “Recognizing Collectives as Moral Agents,” *Theological Studies* 85, no. 1 (2024): 98.

¹⁷ Keenan, “Recognizing Collectives as Moral Agents,” 123. See also Conor M. Kelly, *Racism and Structural Sin: Confronting Injustice with the Eyes of Faith* (Liturgical Press, 2023); Conor M. Kelly, “Systemic Racism as Cultural and Structural Sin: Distinctive Contributions from Catholic Social Thought,” *Journal of Catholic Social Thought* 20, no. 1 (2023): 143–165; Conor M. Kelly, “‘Why We Can’t Wait’: Racism and the Church,” *Theological Studies* 85, no. 4 (2024): 726–727.

consideration of the presence and impact of collectives in the social fabric.¹⁸

The ethical task of all moral agents engaged in fostering intercultural ethics is to continue recognizing the signs of the times and discerning what, where, and how the Spirit is calling each one of us to act in our own culture by understanding, appreciating, respecting, and engaging in dialogical ways with other cultures, and within the whole church and the entire world. This task requires avoiding discrimination and marginalization while continuously learning together, especially from those who are not usually seen as teachers.

Institutions

In reflecting on intercultural ethics, it is necessary to clarify the type of interactions that occur between moral agents and the social structures that inform and affect the contexts in which people are situated, live, and work. However, this clarification generates an ethical choice and is thus not merely descriptive and disincarnated. Intercultural ethics should be at the service of a vision of society that strives to promote the common good, despite how challenging it might be to identify and pursue it, especially when we adopt an inclusive and comprehensive understanding of what is good. Within the Catholic context, such a pursuit depends on existing institutions. As Pope Benedict XVI wrote in his 2009 encyclical letter *Caritas in Veritate: On Integral Human Development in Charity and Truth*:

To take a stand for the common good is on the one hand to be solicitous for, and on the other hand to avail oneself of, that complex of institutions that give structure to the life of society, juridically, civilly,

¹⁸ See Keenan, "Recognizing Collectives as Moral Agents," 99. Kenneth Himes argued: "The language of social sin refers to collectives, systems, and institutions that are expressive of and supported by a group." Kenneth R. Himes, "Social Sin and the Role of the Individual," *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* 6 (1986): 190. Quoted by Keenan, "Recognizing Collectives as Moral Agents," 99.

politically and culturally, making it the *pólis*, or ‘city.’ The more we strive to secure a common good corresponding to the real needs of our neighbours, the more effectively we love them. Every Christian is called to practise this charity, in a manner corresponding to his vocation and according to the degree of influence he wields in the *pólis*. This is the institutional path—we might also call it the political path—of charity, no less excellent and effective than the kind of charity which encounters the neighbour directly, outside the institutional mediation of the *pólis*. (*Caritas in Veritate*, no. 7)

Hence, as the Catholic theologian Daniel Finn stresses, what is presupposed is that “the common good includes not just individual actions in service of others, but also the creation and maintenance of institutions that structure life, some governmental and some societal.”¹⁹ Moreover, “Our actions as individuals both help to create and sustain the institutions within which we live and are deeply shaped by them. When those institutions provide incentives for individuals to undertake destructive behaviors, they are rightly called ‘structures of sin.’”²⁰ Hence, “improvement in the morality of our public institutions” is demanded.²¹

For the Himes brothers, Michael and Kenneth, “Catholicism’s optimism regarding the person’s ability to act on motives other than self-interest means that in creating a social order institutions can rely upon human dispositions toward cooperation and self-giving, not just competition.”²² In this case, when institutions contribute to foster virtuous behaviors and embody virtuous dynamics, they can be considered structures of virtue.²³ Within the social context, structures should be carefully defined. According to Finn:

¹⁹ Finn, *Christian Economic Ethics*, 315.

²⁰ Finn, *Christian Economic Ethics*, 317.

²¹ Finn, *Christian Economic Ethics*, 195.

²² Michael J. Himes and Kenneth R. Himes, *Fullness of Faith: The Public Significance of Theology* (Paulist Press, 1993), 38. Quoted in Finn, *Christian Economic Ethics*, 355.

²³ See Daniel J. Daly, *The Structures of Virtue and Vice* (Georgetown University Press, 2021).

A social structure is a system of relations among preexisting social positions into which persons enter. Structures affect moral agency because the incentives and disincentives they generate tend to alter the decisions of persons within them. Personal moral responsibility requires not only virtuous decisions within structures (resisting restrictions and opportunities that encourage morally evil decisions) but also effective efforts to alter social structures so that restrictions and opportunities make morally good decisions more likely and, in the long run, shape us to be morally better persons.²⁴

Hence, theologians are invited to consider institutions in terms of structures, being aware that “structures and culture exist in an intimate relationship.”²⁵ However, there is “a fundamental difference between structures and culture; structure consists of objective relations among social positions, while culture consists of ideas, objects, and other things with meaningful content. People may or may not be aware of the structural relations within which they live, but culture is impossible without human awareness of, or at least an unconscious resonance with, the meaning inherent in cultural objects.”²⁶

Moreover, as the Catholic theologian Kristin Heyer argues, “Structures and culture generate enticements that make sinful complicity more likely and virtuous choices more rare, while keeping freedom intact, including agents’ ability to transform sinful structures and culture.”²⁷ Benedict XVI also noticed that in the recent past “cultures were relatively well defined and had greater opportunity to defend themselves against attempts to merge them into one. Today the possibilities of *interaction between cultures* have increased significantly, giving rise to new openings for

²⁴ Daniel K. Finn, *Consumer Ethics in a Global Economy: How Buying Here Causes Injustice There* (Georgetown University Press, 2019), 157. See also 68 and 69.

²⁵ Finn, *Consumer Ethics in a Global Economy*, 125. See also Matthew A. Shadle, “Culture,” in *Moral Agency within Social Structures and Culture: A Primer on Critical Realism for Christian Ethics*, ed. D. K. Finn (Georgetown University Press, 2020), 43–58.

²⁶ Finn, *Consumer Ethics in a Global Economy*, 73.

²⁷ Kristin E. Heyer, “‘Hearts of Flesh’: Structural Sin and Social Salvation,” *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 78 (2024): 70.

intercultural dialogue: a dialogue that, if it is to be effective, has to set out from a deep-seated knowledge of the specific identity of the various dialogue partners.” (*Caritas in Veritate*, no. 26) Moreover, he points to “a twofold danger”:

First, one may observe a *cultural eclecticism* that is often assumed uncritically: cultures are simply placed alongside one another and viewed as substantially equivalent and interchangeable. This easily yields to a relativism that does not serve true intercultural dialogue; on the social plane, cultural relativism has the effect that cultural groups coexist side by side, but remain separate, with no authentic dialogue and therefore with no true integration. Secondly, the opposite danger exists, that of *cultural levelling* and indiscriminate acceptance of types of conduct and life-styles. In this way one loses sight of the profound significance of the culture of different nations, of the traditions of the various peoples, by which the individual defines himself in relation to life’s fundamental questions. What eclecticism and cultural levelling have in common is the separation of culture from human nature. Thus, cultures can no longer define themselves within a nature that transcends them, and man ends up being reduced to a mere cultural statistic. When this happens, humanity runs new risks of enslavement and manipulation. (*Caritas in Veritate*, no. 26)

Hence, for Benedict XVI, the value of intercultural dialogue is a risky endeavor, tempered by two significant dangers, echoing the opposition between a culture of death and a culture of life that informed the teaching and pontificate of his predecessor, Pope John Paul II.

More recently, throughout his pontificate Pope Francis has repeatedly invited us to consider the institutional contributions and challenges that inform personal and social agency and that support or affect the commitment to promote the common good. First, in his 2013 apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium: On the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today’s World*, the Church itself is understood as an institution (nos. 65,

95, 111)²⁸ composed of multiple institutions (no. 29), including parishes (no. 28), while noting “the failure of our institutions to be welcoming” (no. 70) and appreciating “the soundness of civil institutions” (no. 183).

In his 2015 encyclical letter *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*, Pope Francis develops his indictment of institutions and their contributions by stressing that “we are all too slow in developing economic institutions and social initiatives which can give the poor regular access to basic resources. We fail to see the deepest roots of our present failures, which have to do with the direction, goals, meaning and social implications of technological and economic growth” (no. 109). His criticism depends on his stress on the interrelations between human beings, institutions, structures, and the planet and on the role played by what he defines as the “technocratic paradigm” (nos. 101–114), with its unquestioned reliance on exclusively technological solutions to social problems. Hence, in a more positive mode, “If everything is related, then the health of a society’s institutions has consequences for the environment and the quality of human life” (no. 142).

While the focus of the pope’s reasoning is the care for the environment, what he proposes has implications for any commitment to promote intercultural ethics as a form of social ecology culturally relevant (nos. 143–146). In his words,

Social ecology is necessarily institutional, and gradually extends to the whole of society, from the primary social group, the family, to the wider local, national and international communities. Within each social stratum, and between them, institutions develop to regulate human relationships. Anything which weakens those institutions has negative consequences, such as injustice, violence and loss of freedom. A number of countries have a relatively low level of institutional effectiveness, which results in greater problems for their people while benefiting those who profit from this situation. (no. 142)

²⁸ See also Richard R. Gaillardetz, “The Chimera of a ‘Deinstitutionalized Church’: Social Structure Analysis as a Path to Institutional Church Reform,” *Theological Studies* 83, no. 2 (2022): 219–244.

Analogously, he claims that “it is essential to devise stronger and more efficiently organized international institutions” (no. 175), that are aimed at addressing the challenges of climate change and pollution, and could even go beyond this urgent challenge and point toward the need to continue sharpening the attention given to institutions and structures aimed at fostering ethical agency and virtuous commitments. Hence, for Francis, “Political and institutional frameworks do not exist simply to avoid bad practice, but also to promote best practice, to stimulate creativity in seeking new solutions and to encourage individual or group initiatives” (no. 177).

Moreover, the pope’s teaching builds on his recognition of “the various cultural riches of different peoples” (no. 63; see also no. 57) and on the “need to respect the rights of peoples and cultures, and to appreciate that the development of a social group presupposes an historical process which takes place within a cultural context and demands the constant and active involvement of local people *from within their proper culture*” (no. 144).

Francis’s critical assessment of institutions continues in his 2020 encyclical *Fratelli Tutti: On Fraternity and Social Friendship*, condemning “the use of institutions for personal or corporate gain” (no. 75), noting how “we can also feel helpless because our institutions are neglected and lack resources, or simply serve the interests of a few, without and within” (no. 76). In constructive terms, for Francis it is an urgent task to “create more sound institutions, more just regulations, more supportive structures” (no. 186). In particular, “What we need in fact are states and civil institutions that are present and active, that look beyond the free and efficient working of certain economic, political or ideological systems, and are primarily concerned with individuals and the common good” (no. 108). However, “The twenty-first century ‘is witnessing a weakening of the power of nation states, chiefly because the economic and financial sectors, being transnational, tend to prevail over the political. Given this situation, it is essential to devise stronger and more efficiently organized international institutions, with functionaries who are appointed fairly by

agreement among national governments, and empowered to impose sanctions” (no. 172).

Finally, in *Laudate Deum*, his 2023 apostolic exhortation on the climate crisis, Francis forcefully argues that “it is no longer helpful for us to support institutions in order to preserve the rights of the more powerful without caring for those of all” (no. 43). Moreover, for the pope, “There are no lasting changes without cultural changes, without a maturing of lifestyles and convictions within societies, and there are no cultural changes without personal changes” (no. 70). In his critical analysis “globalization favours spontaneous cultural interchanges, greater mutual knowledge and processes of integration of peoples, which end up provoking a multilateralism ‘from below’ and not simply one determined by the elites of power. The demands that rise up from below throughout the world, where activists from very different countries help and support one another, can end up pressuring the sources of power” (no. 38). Hence, he argues for the urgency of “creating a new culture” (no. 71).

Conclusion

Fostering intercultural theological ethics requires the critical assessment of moral agents and of their agency. Moreover, critical attention should be given to institutions and structures. Finally, change and the transformation of many institutions are needed to further promote intercultural ethics. Hence, intercultural theological ethics demands a critical analysis of today’s world and cultures, one where Jesus allows us to see the needed conversion of cultures and societies, as H. Richard Niebuhr proposed. Theologically, what is presupposed is that the Holy Spirit is also present in the multiplicity of cultures, at least in some of their elements.

At the same time, moral agents should be able to experience how the contemporary world, with its various and diverse cultural realities, invites us to ask for the gift of personal and social conversion “in the face of deeply

seated motivations, orientations, and loves.”²⁹ In particular, for Heyer, “Despite Francis’s admirable calls to encounter at various peripheries (sometimes at the service of softening disorientations), episodic practices can be reconfirming rather than reconfiguring. Social conversion instead demands centering the protagonism of those marginalized. Decolonial theological scholarship and praxis prod the church and theological academy to move beyond unidirectional or instrumentalized engagement of voices and contributions from those on the underside of structural violence.”³⁰ Hence, Heyer continues, “The dynamics of structural sin and conversion demand that theologians take seriously both the powerful factors that shape agency and human freedom amid even those pervasive, sinful structures, cultures, and imaginaries.”³¹

Cultures are living realities that continue to evolve and transform. Sometimes they even show regressive tendencies and become insular. As cultures change, moral agents and institutions might be transformed too, contributing to cultural changes or being affected by them. How these changes are experienced and navigated calls us to foster critical analysis and discerning attitudes. Theological ethics accompanies individuals, groups, networks, collectives, and institutions in living and addressing these transformations by fostering an inclusive—Catholic—approach that aims at empowering moral agents; that critically assesses moral agents and institutions, along with their practices; and that strives to modify unjust structures and their power dynamics.



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²⁹ Heyer, “‘Hearts of Flesh’: Structural Sin and Social Salvation,” 81.

³⁰ Heyer, “‘Hearts of Flesh’: Structural Sin and Social Salvation,” 87.

³¹ Heyer, “‘Hearts of Flesh’: Structural Sin and Social Salvation,” 75–76.

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