

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.