

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. Hübenthal 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.



Sigrid Müller is University Professor at the Institute of Systematic Theology and Ethics at the University of Vienna. She has published broadly on the history of moral theology and Late Medieval ethics and co-edits a peer-reviewed book series in the fields of moral theology ("Studien der Moralthologie. Neue Folge") and bioethics ("Bioethics in Discussion"). Recent publications include studies on human dignity, recent developments in the moral teaching of the Church, synodality and *sensus fidelium*, and on interdisciplinary approaches to moral anthropology. She is currently working on a history of moral theology.