

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

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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 dharmaśāstra*, 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 dharmaśāstra*, 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 cāham 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 Rādhā, 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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