

9. The Role of Gender in Intercultural Ethics

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Role of Gender in Theological Ethics

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁶ Hilpert, “Gerechtigkeitsrelevante Kategorie,” 34.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Intercultural Theological Ethics and Gender

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

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

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

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

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

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

²⁰ Cahill, "Justicia," 49.

²¹ Cahill, "Justicia," 39–40.

²² Cahill, "Justicia," 49–52.

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

intercultural setting.²⁴

Requirements for a Gender-Sensitive Intercultural Theological Ethics

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

An Inclusive, Holistic, Realistic and Multidimensional Anthropology

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

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

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

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

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

From an Androcentric to an Inclusive Anthropology

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

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

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

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

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

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

From a Dualistic to a Holistic Anthropology

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

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

From an Idealistic to a Realistic Anthropology

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

From a One-Dimensional to a Multidimensional Anthropology

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Intersectionality

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Decolonization and Postcolonialism

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁵⁵ Farley, *Just Love*, 58.

⁵⁶ Farley, *Just Love*, 43.

⁵⁷ Farley, *Just Love*, 66.

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

Although most former colonies have now achieved at least formal political independence, colonialism has by no means been overcome and continues to determine interactions between cultures and societies. Western ideas of progress and modernity, and also of morality and sexuality, continue to determine the global discourse and forms of (neo-)colonial power relations persist due to political and economic dependencies.⁶⁰ These realities point to the need for a high degree of sensitivity within intercultural theological ethics, especially when it comes to gender and sexuality. As Farley writes, “Every effort to understand ourselves and others, therefore, requires that we challenge the legacies of previous interpreters, probe our own biases, critique our place in the historical dynamics of power and knowledge, and identify the categories that lead to error and to harm.”⁶¹

Doing Justice to People as Individuals

Gender plays an essential role in intercultural theological ethics. Gender and gender roles vary greatly in different cultures and social contexts and

⁵⁸ Farley, *Just Love*, 67.

⁵⁹ Farley, *Just Love*, 66–67.

⁶⁰ Farley, *Just Love*, 68.

⁶¹ Farley, *Just Love*, 65.

are often influenced by religious beliefs. This makes it clear that gender is not only important for theological ethics in general, but also for intercultural theological ethics specifically. As I emphasized throughout this chapter, it is essential to consider gender as part of the reality of every life, especially since (intercultural) theological ethics seeks to reflect on the question of the good life and to offer orientation in this respect. Gender is not only an important aspect of identity but also the cause of discrimination and gender-based violence, which significantly impede the realization of a good life. As a category of analysis, insecurity, and justice, gender plays a fundamental role. Insofar as theological ethics wants to establish universally valid norms while also doing justice to people and their distinct experiences, it is necessary to critically examine gender, both generally and with regard to one's own discipline. In the context of intercultural theological ethics, gender sensitivity, intersectionality, decolonialization, and postcoloniality, combined with a realistic, holistic, multidimensional, and inclusive anthropology, are absolutely necessary in order to do justice to the reality of human life with all its facets and entanglements.



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