

15. Intercultural Ethics and Institutions: Challenges and Possibilities

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In his 1951 book *Christ and Culture*, the Protestant theologian H. Richard Niebuhr reflects on both titular subjects, Christ and culture. He defines culture as “the total process of human activity,”¹ “the social heritage,”² and “human achievement”³ in the areas of “language, habits, ideas, beliefs, customs, social organization, inherited artifacts, technical processes, and values.”⁴ Such a “*world of values*,”⁵ which are good, long to be realized both in temporal and in material ways, while striving to conserve values in pluralist contexts.⁶

In discussing various ways in which Christians have sought to live faithfully as disciples of Christ as they interact with cultures, Niebuhr proposes a typology that depends on three approaches:

- opposition to culture (Christ against culture),
- agreement between Christ and culture (the Christ of culture),
- and a combination that incorporates insights from both of these two views (Christ above culture).

Within the third framework Niebuhr highlights three variations:

- a synthetic type that sees Christ as the fulfillment of culture,

¹ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (Harper, 1951), 32.

² Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 33.

³ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 33.

⁴ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 32.

⁵ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 34, emphasis original.

⁶ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 34–39.

- a dualistic type that sees an ongoing tension between Christ and culture,
- and a conversionist type that portrays Jesus as the converter of culture and society.

Niebuhr's framework continues to inspire and guide a critical assessment of intercultural modalities and their dynamics. His Christological focus is essential, but it appears to undermine a broader attention that should be given to moral agents, the Church, communities, and institutions. This volume shows how further approaches are possible and even needed. In diverse ways, the previous chapters explore how to engage in intercultural theological ethics, which requires us to focus on moral agents and their agency understood in multiple ways. At the same time, institutions play a crucial role in fostering or inhibiting intercultural ethical interactions and dynamics. Their roles, responsibilities, challenges, and limitations further deepen the focus on moral agents and their agency, as well as on their relational interactions and the intercultural processes they embody, facilitate, or inhibit. This concluding chapter critically examines institutions and structures, especially in relationship to moral agents and their agency.

Moral Agents

First, in fostering intercultural theological ethics, initial attention could be given to scholars and authority figures, like theologians and bishops in the Catholic Church, by considering them as privileged interlocutors. Because of their training, commitments, and responsibilities,⁷ they are positioned to be and become facilitators of intercultural interactions or, regrettably, inhibitors. Together with training, experience matters. Being exposed to

⁷ On responsibility, see H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy* (Harper & Row, 1978); William Schweiker, "Responsibility and Moral Realities," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 22, no. 4 (2009): 472–495.

diverse cultural, religious, and socio-political contexts is an incentive to rediscover one's cultural identity, with its own specificities and limitations. One can reappropriate one's story with its cultural markers but also examine one's assumptions and experiences critically by questioning previously unchallenged presuppositions. At the same time, such exposure creates proximity with contexts encountered as "other." We discover similarities and differences, striving to appreciate their history and ongoing implications.

The fecundity of these displacements and interactions depends on the willingness to generously (but critically) examine one's cultural context and the humble openness to encounter another cultural reality with open eyes and intellectual benevolence, avoiding preconceptions and rushed judgments. What this process presupposes is embodying one's identity—socially, politically, and historically—in ways that make possible, and even facilitate, the encounter with the other. Hence, the truth about oneself and one's own culture leads to encountering truthfully another cultural context. In both cases one realizes that these truths are multilayered and evolving because of the dynamisms of both one's identity and other cultures.⁸

However, everything that inhibits the truthful recognition of one's identity and the hospitable encounter with another culture will complexify or compromise intercultural interactions. The wrongful assumption that truth about oneself and the other can be owned, controlled, and manipulated reflects an understanding of truth that is propositional rather than relational. In Christianity, the truth that encompasses all truths is Jesus, and believers relate to Jesus as the truth (John 14:6). Jesus cannot be owned, controlled, or manipulated. One's relationship to their own truth and cultural realities influences

⁸ See Bernard J. F. Lonergan, "The Transition from a Classicist World-View to Historical-Mindedness," in *A Second Collection: Papers by Bernard J. F. Lonergan, S.J.*, ed. W. F. J. Ryan and B. Tyrrell (University of Toronto Press for Lonergan Research Institute of Regis College, 1996), 1–10.

intercultural dynamics, as seen in instances where scholars and authority figures inhibit rather than foster intercultural endeavors.

Furthermore, historically, theology in general and moral theology in particular were fields reserved to clergy, whether diocesan or religious priests.⁹ This reality is still present in most of the world. In many places theology is not yet considered an academic discipline that deserves to be taught in non-confessional universities. Moreover, the limited working opportunities in ecclesial academic institutions are mostly reserved to clergy. A few national exceptions are notable—in the United Kingdom, Austria, Germany, and the United States—where theology holds the rank of academic discipline and where theology is taught in colleges and universities alongside the many other formative academic disciplines which characterize the humanities, as well as the social and natural sciences. Notably, questions, concerns, challenges, and experiences of lay people trained as theologians and engaged in the academy as teachers and scholars differ from those of clergy and religious. Hence, even simply focusing on moral agents, it becomes clear that the institutional settings—or their absence—in which these agents live, work, teach, and publish significantly influence the opportunities for fruitful intercultural immersion and exchange, or greatly constrain them. Authentic intercultural exchange requires identifying and naming missing voices and experiences that are silenced and striving to create conditions that might allow for further recognition and integration.¹⁰

⁹ See Charles E. Curran, *History and Contemporary Issues: Studies in Moral Theology* (Continuum, 1996); Charles E. Curran, *Catholic Moral Theology in the United States: A History* (Georgetown University Press, 2008); James F. Keenan, *A History of Catholic Moral Theology in the Twentieth Century: From Confessing Sins to Liberating Consciences* (Continuum, 2010); James F. Keenan, *A History of Catholic Theological Ethics* (Paulist Press, 2022); John Mahoney, *The Making of Moral Theology: A Study of the Roman Catholic Tradition* (Clarendon Press and Oxford University Press, 1987); Marciano Vidal, *Historia de la Teología Moral* (Perpetuo Socorro Editorial, 2012–2017).

¹⁰ As examples, see Justin Forbes and Katherine M. Douglass, “Disrupting Ecclesial Norms: Emerging Findings from the Missing Voices Project,” *Theology Today* 79, no. 3 (2022): 272–277; M. Adams Jared, “Missing Voices of Ecofeminism in Environmental Governance: Consequences and Future Directions,” *Ethics & the Environment* 28, no. 1 (2023): 55–74; Bryan Massingale, “The Systematic Erasure of the Black/Dark-Skinned Body,” in *Catholic Theological Ethics, Past, Present,*

These institutional constraints, which depend on existing academic and political choices, affect theology, the academy, and civil society by ensuring the limited impact and marginal influence of theological discourse, education, and formation, as well as social collaborative engagements informed by theologians and by the whole field of theology.¹¹ This loss has negative social consequences. By its nature, theological ethics is an interdisciplinary discipline that engages philosophy, social and natural sciences, anthropology, sociology, and political science—just to name a few. Theological ethics, through dialogue and collaborations, fosters mutual disciplinary enrichment. The current academic and social settings where theology is part of the academic and social fabric benefit from this very inclusion. Theology forms moral agents, engages multiple disciplines, and strives to promote the common good in the civic arena.

Theologically, in today's pluralist and multireligious world, the mystery of the Incarnation invites us to an inclusive approach that is not limited to hierarchical figures, but that at its core relies and depends on the experiences and competence of diverse moral agents. Theologians should not situate themselves apart from the culture in which they live and from what is happening in today's world. Moreover, academic and social transformations should heighten their presence within the social fabric. As an academic discipline, theological ethics cares about what is happening to God's people, loved by God and with whom God relates. Theological ethicists focus on people's challenges, struggles, and practices, and join

and Future: The Trento Conference, ed. J. F. Keenan (Orbis Books, 2012), 116–123; Antonio Moser, “Trent: The Historical Contribution and the Voices That Went Unheard,” in Keenan, *Catholic Theological Ethics, Past, Present, and Future*, 96–106; Anne Nasimiyu-Wasike, “The Missing Voices of Women,” in Keenan, *Catholic Theological Ethics, Past, Present, and Future*, 107–115; Nyambura J. Njoroge, “The Missing Voice: African Women Doing Theology,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 99 (1997): 77–83; Annie Selak, “Missing Voices in *Amoris Laetitia*: An Examination of Law, Narrative, and Possibilities for Inclusion in Roman Catholic Church Teaching,” *Journal of Catholic Social Thought* 16, no. 1 (2019): 83–102.

¹¹ “Civil society is that network of organizations larger than the family but smaller than the national government that help organize daily life.” Daniel K. Finn, *Christian Economic Ethics: History and Implications* (Fortress Press, 2013), 208.

others in their efforts to address multilayered social needs in the diverse cultural contexts in which citizens and believers live.

The Catholic theologian David Hollenbach has stressed how existing “polycentric governance and networking”¹² add complexity to the role and function of institutions in today’s globalized world. For Hollenbach, “Promoting the common good in its fullness will require working together in networks that cross local and national boundaries and also bridge the divisions that often separate business, government, and civil society.”¹³ Hence, such a “network of crisscrossing communities,”¹⁴ he continues, “will help overcome the divisions that today drive some groups into conflict and that leave far too many with no social support at all.”¹⁵ Both individual agency and institutions should foster solidarity and strive for greater social justice.

For the Catholic theologian James Keenan, further attention should be given to collectives as moral agents, which “are more than the sum of the persons involved”¹⁶ and have institutional, structural, and systemic influence. Collectives can be virtuous, promoting the agency of groups and their agendas and fostering social change, or they can be vicious, “like those that are racist, sexist, or homophobic, as well as morally ambiguous collectives (like many populist movements).”¹⁷ Hence, the attention given to identifying the social dimension of sin benefits from a more careful

¹² David Hollenbach, SJ, “The Glory of God and the Global Common Good: Solidarity in a Turbulent World,” *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 72 (2017): 56.

¹³ Hollenbach, “The Glory of God and the Global Common Good,” 57.

¹⁴ Hollenbach, “The Glory of God and the Global Common Good,” 57. Quoted in David Hollenbach, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 229.

¹⁵ Hollenbach, “The Glory of God and the Global Common Good,” 57.

¹⁶ James F. Keenan, “Recognizing Collectives as Moral Agents,” *Theological Studies* 85, no. 1 (2024): 98.

¹⁷ Keenan, “Recognizing Collectives as Moral Agents,” 123. See also Conor M. Kelly, *Racism and Structural Sin: Confronting Injustice with the Eyes of Faith* (Liturgical Press, 2023); Conor M. Kelly, “Systemic Racism as Cultural and Structural Sin: Distinctive Contributions from Catholic Social Thought,” *Journal of Catholic Social Thought* 20, no. 1 (2023): 143–165; Conor M. Kelly, “‘Why We Can’t Wait’: Racism and the Church,” *Theological Studies* 85, no. 4 (2024): 726–727.

consideration of the presence and impact of collectives in the social fabric.¹⁸

The ethical task of all moral agents engaged in fostering intercultural ethics is to continue recognizing the signs of the times and discerning what, where, and how the Spirit is calling each one of us to act in our own culture by understanding, appreciating, respecting, and engaging in dialogical ways with other cultures, and within the whole church and the entire world. This task requires avoiding discrimination and marginalization while continuously learning together, especially from those who are not usually seen as teachers.

Institutions

In reflecting on intercultural ethics, it is necessary to clarify the type of interactions that occur between moral agents and the social structures that inform and affect the contexts in which people are situated, live, and work. However, this clarification generates an ethical choice and is thus not merely descriptive and disincarnated. Intercultural ethics should be at the service of a vision of society that strives to promote the common good, despite how challenging it might be to identify and pursue it, especially when we adopt an inclusive and comprehensive understanding of what is good. Within the Catholic context, such a pursuit depends on existing institutions. As Pope Benedict XVI wrote in his 2009 encyclical letter *Caritas in Veritate: On Integral Human Development in Charity and Truth*:

To take a stand for the common good is on the one hand to be solicitous for, and on the other hand to avail oneself of, that complex of institutions that give structure to the life of society, juridically, civilly,

¹⁸ See Keenan, "Recognizing Collectives as Moral Agents," 99. Kenneth Himes argued: "The language of social sin refers to collectives, systems, and institutions that are expressive of and supported by a group." Kenneth R. Himes, "Social Sin and the Role of the Individual," *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* 6 (1986): 190. Quoted by Keenan, "Recognizing Collectives as Moral Agents," 99.

politically and culturally, making it the *pólis*, or ‘city.’ The more we strive to secure a common good corresponding to the real needs of our neighbours, the more effectively we love them. Every Christian is called to practise this charity, in a manner corresponding to his vocation and according to the degree of influence he wields in the *pólis*. This is the institutional path—we might also call it the political path—of charity, no less excellent and effective than the kind of charity which encounters the neighbour directly, outside the institutional mediation of the *pólis*. (*Caritas in Veritate*, no. 7)

Hence, as the Catholic theologian Daniel Finn stresses, what is presupposed is that “the common good includes not just individual actions in service of others, but also the creation and maintenance of institutions that structure life, some governmental and some societal.”¹⁹ Moreover, “Our actions as individuals both help to create and sustain the institutions within which we live and are deeply shaped by them. When those institutions provide incentives for individuals to undertake destructive behaviors, they are rightly called ‘structures of sin.’”²⁰ Hence, “improvement in the morality of our public institutions” is demanded.²¹

For the Himes brothers, Michael and Kenneth, “Catholicism’s optimism regarding the person’s ability to act on motives other than self-interest means that in creating a social order institutions can rely upon human dispositions toward cooperation and self-giving, not just competition.”²² In this case, when institutions contribute to foster virtuous behaviors and embody virtuous dynamics, they can be considered structures of virtue.²³ Within the social context, structures should be carefully defined. According to Finn:

¹⁹ Finn, *Christian Economic Ethics*, 315.

²⁰ Finn, *Christian Economic Ethics*, 317.

²¹ Finn, *Christian Economic Ethics*, 195.

²² Michael J. Himes and Kenneth R. Himes, *Fullness of Faith: The Public Significance of Theology* (Paulist Press, 1993), 38. Quoted in Finn, *Christian Economic Ethics*, 355.

²³ See Daniel J. Daly, *The Structures of Virtue and Vice* (Georgetown University Press, 2021).

A social structure is a system of relations among preexisting social positions into which persons enter. Structures affect moral agency because the incentives and disincentives they generate tend to alter the decisions of persons within them. Personal moral responsibility requires not only virtuous decisions within structures (resisting restrictions and opportunities that encourage morally evil decisions) but also effective efforts to alter social structures so that restrictions and opportunities make morally good decisions more likely and, in the long run, shape us to be morally better persons.²⁴

Hence, theologians are invited to consider institutions in terms of structures, being aware that “structures and culture exist in an intimate relationship.”²⁵ However, there is “a fundamental difference between structures and culture; structure consists of objective relations among social positions, while culture consists of ideas, objects, and other things with meaningful content. People may or may not be aware of the structural relations within which they live, but culture is impossible without human awareness of, or at least an unconscious resonance with, the meaning inherent in cultural objects.”²⁶

Moreover, as the Catholic theologian Kristin Heyer argues, “Structures and culture generate enticements that make sinful complicity more likely and virtuous choices more rare, while keeping freedom intact, including agents’ ability to transform sinful structures and culture.”²⁷ Benedict XVI also noticed that in the recent past “cultures were relatively well defined and had greater opportunity to defend themselves against attempts to merge them into one. Today the possibilities of *interaction between cultures* have increased significantly, giving rise to new openings for

²⁴ Daniel K. Finn, *Consumer Ethics in a Global Economy: How Buying Here Causes Injustice There* (Georgetown University Press, 2019), 157. See also 68 and 69.

²⁵ Finn, *Consumer Ethics in a Global Economy*, 125. See also Matthew A. Shadle, “Culture,” in *Moral Agency within Social Structures and Culture: A Primer on Critical Realism for Christian Ethics*, ed. D. K. Finn (Georgetown University Press, 2020), 43–58.

²⁶ Finn, *Consumer Ethics in a Global Economy*, 73.

²⁷ Kristin E. Heyer, “‘Hearts of Flesh’: Structural Sin and Social Salvation,” *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 78 (2024): 70.

intercultural dialogue: a dialogue that, if it is to be effective, has to set out from a deep-seated knowledge of the specific identity of the various dialogue partners.” (*Caritas in Veritate*, no. 26) Moreover, he points to “a twofold danger”:

First, one may observe a *cultural eclecticism* that is often assumed uncritically: cultures are simply placed alongside one another and viewed as substantially equivalent and interchangeable. This easily yields to a relativism that does not serve true intercultural dialogue; on the social plane, cultural relativism has the effect that cultural groups coexist side by side, but remain separate, with no authentic dialogue and therefore with no true integration. Secondly, the opposite danger exists, that of *cultural levelling* and indiscriminate acceptance of types of conduct and life-styles. In this way one loses sight of the profound significance of the culture of different nations, of the traditions of the various peoples, by which the individual defines himself in relation to life’s fundamental questions. What eclecticism and cultural levelling have in common is the separation of culture from human nature. Thus, cultures can no longer define themselves within a nature that transcends them, and man ends up being reduced to a mere cultural statistic. When this happens, humanity runs new risks of enslavement and manipulation. (*Caritas in Veritate*, no. 26)

Hence, for Benedict XVI, the value of intercultural dialogue is a risky endeavor, tempered by two significant dangers, echoing the opposition between a culture of death and a culture of life that informed the teaching and pontificate of his predecessor, Pope John Paul II.

More recently, throughout his pontificate Pope Francis has repeatedly invited us to consider the institutional contributions and challenges that inform personal and social agency and that support or affect the commitment to promote the common good. First, in his 2013 apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium: On the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today’s World*, the Church itself is understood as an institution (nos. 65,

95, 111)²⁸ composed of multiple institutions (no. 29), including parishes (no. 28), while noting “the failure of our institutions to be welcoming” (no. 70) and appreciating “the soundness of civil institutions” (no. 183).

In his 2015 encyclical letter *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*, Pope Francis develops his indictment of institutions and their contributions by stressing that “we are all too slow in developing economic institutions and social initiatives which can give the poor regular access to basic resources. We fail to see the deepest roots of our present failures, which have to do with the direction, goals, meaning and social implications of technological and economic growth” (no. 109). His criticism depends on his stress on the interrelations between human beings, institutions, structures, and the planet and on the role played by what he defines as the “technocratic paradigm” (nos. 101–114), with its unquestioned reliance on exclusively technological solutions to social problems. Hence, in a more positive mode, “If everything is related, then the health of a society’s institutions has consequences for the environment and the quality of human life” (no. 142).

While the focus of the pope’s reasoning is the care for the environment, what he proposes has implications for any commitment to promote intercultural ethics as a form of social ecology culturally relevant (nos. 143–146). In his words,

Social ecology is necessarily institutional, and gradually extends to the whole of society, from the primary social group, the family, to the wider local, national and international communities. Within each social stratum, and between them, institutions develop to regulate human relationships. Anything which weakens those institutions has negative consequences, such as injustice, violence and loss of freedom. A number of countries have a relatively low level of institutional effectiveness, which results in greater problems for their people while benefiting those who profit from this situation. (no. 142)

²⁸ See also Richard R. Gaillardetz, “The Chimera of a ‘Deinstitutionalized Church’: Social Structure Analysis as a Path to Institutional Church Reform,” *Theological Studies* 83, no. 2 (2022): 219–244.

Analogously, he claims that “it is essential to devise stronger and more efficiently organized international institutions” (no. 175), that are aimed at addressing the challenges of climate change and pollution, and could even go beyond this urgent challenge and point toward the need to continue sharpening the attention given to institutions and structures aimed at fostering ethical agency and virtuous commitments. Hence, for Francis, “Political and institutional frameworks do not exist simply to avoid bad practice, but also to promote best practice, to stimulate creativity in seeking new solutions and to encourage individual or group initiatives” (no. 177).

Moreover, the pope’s teaching builds on his recognition of “the various cultural riches of different peoples” (no. 63; see also no. 57) and on the “need to respect the rights of peoples and cultures, and to appreciate that the development of a social group presupposes an historical process which takes place within a cultural context and demands the constant and active involvement of local people *from within their proper culture*” (no. 144).

Francis’s critical assessment of institutions continues in his 2020 encyclical *Fratelli Tutti: On Fraternity and Social Friendship*, condemning “the use of institutions for personal or corporate gain” (no. 75), noting how “we can also feel helpless because our institutions are neglected and lack resources, or simply serve the interests of a few, without and within” (no. 76). In constructive terms, for Francis it is an urgent task to “create more sound institutions, more just regulations, more supportive structures” (no. 186). In particular, “What we need in fact are states and civil institutions that are present and active, that look beyond the free and efficient working of certain economic, political or ideological systems, and are primarily concerned with individuals and the common good” (no. 108). However, “The twenty-first century ‘is witnessing a weakening of the power of nation states, chiefly because the economic and financial sectors, being transnational, tend to prevail over the political. Given this situation, it is essential to devise stronger and more efficiently organized international institutions, with functionaries who are appointed fairly by

agreement among national governments, and empowered to impose sanctions” (no. 172).

Finally, in *Laudate Deum*, his 2023 apostolic exhortation on the climate crisis, Francis forcefully argues that “it is no longer helpful for us to support institutions in order to preserve the rights of the more powerful without caring for those of all” (no. 43). Moreover, for the pope, “There are no lasting changes without cultural changes, without a maturing of lifestyles and convictions within societies, and there are no cultural changes without personal changes” (no. 70). In his critical analysis “globalization favours spontaneous cultural interchanges, greater mutual knowledge and processes of integration of peoples, which end up provoking a multilateralism ‘from below’ and not simply one determined by the elites of power. The demands that rise up from below throughout the world, where activists from very different countries help and support one another, can end up pressuring the sources of power” (no. 38). Hence, he argues for the urgency of “creating a new culture” (no. 71).

Conclusion

Fostering intercultural theological ethics requires the critical assessment of moral agents and of their agency. Moreover, critical attention should be given to institutions and structures. Finally, change and the transformation of many institutions are needed to further promote intercultural ethics. Hence, intercultural theological ethics demands a critical analysis of today’s world and cultures, one where Jesus allows us to see the needed conversion of cultures and societies, as H. Richard Niebuhr proposed. Theologically, what is presupposed is that the Holy Spirit is also present in the multiplicity of cultures, at least in some of their elements.

At the same time, moral agents should be able to experience how the contemporary world, with its various and diverse cultural realities, invites us to ask for the gift of personal and social conversion “in the face of deeply

seated motivations, orientations, and loves.”²⁹ In particular, for Heyer, “Despite Francis’s admirable calls to encounter at various peripheries (sometimes at the service of softening disorientations), episodic practices can be reconfirming rather than reconfiguring. Social conversion instead demands centering the protagonism of those marginalized. Decolonial theological scholarship and praxis prod the church and theological academy to move beyond unidirectional or instrumentalized engagement of voices and contributions from those on the underside of structural violence.”³⁰ Hence, Heyer continues, “The dynamics of structural sin and conversion demand that theologians take seriously both the powerful factors that shape agency and human freedom amid even those pervasive, sinful structures, cultures, and imaginaries.”³¹

Cultures are living realities that continue to evolve and transform. Sometimes they even show regressive tendencies and become insular. As cultures change, moral agents and institutions might be transformed too, contributing to cultural changes or being affected by them. How these changes are experienced and navigated calls us to foster critical analysis and discerning attitudes. Theological ethics accompanies individuals, groups, networks, collectives, and institutions in living and addressing these transformations by fostering an inclusive—Catholic—approach that aims at empowering moral agents; that critically assesses moral agents and institutions, along with their practices; and that strives to modify unjust structures and their power dynamics.



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²⁹ Heyer, “‘Hearts of Flesh’: Structural Sin and Social Salvation,” 81.

³⁰ Heyer, “‘Hearts of Flesh’: Structural Sin and Social Salvation,” 87.

³¹ Heyer, “‘Hearts of Flesh’: Structural Sin and Social Salvation,” 75–76.

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