THROUGH THICK AND THIN:
TEACHING ETHICS IN A CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

Published in *Horizons* 27 (Spring 2000): 63-80.

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Introduction

An issue last year of the Sunday New York Times Book Review contained side-by-side discussion of two books which in a certain way frame some of the issues of doing ethics in our contemporary context. Harvard philosopher Thomas M. Scanlon's What We Owe To Each Other[1] wrestles with the foundations of morality in the analytic tradition of John Rawls, et al, in an attempt to ground an understanding of ethics which could be universally accepted across cultures by all reasonable people of good will. Thus Scanlon argues that "An act is wrong if its performance under the circumstances would be disallowed by any set of principles for the general regulation of behavior that no one could reasonably reject as a basis for informed, unforced general agreement."[2] Echoes of Kant are heard clearly, and the Enlightenment project of trying to establish a firm foundation for ethics remains an important concern. However, in our post-modern world critics of the Enlightenment tradition have raised so many fundamental questions that these really need not be rehearsed here. Suffice it say that while establishing a basis for a common morality[3] remains a laudable goal, just how one lays down the groundwork for such an undertaking remains problematic at best.[4]

Sitting next to the review of Scanlon's tome is a discussion of a work co-authored by noted University of California–Berkeley linguistics professor George Lakoff and University of Oregon philosophy professor Mark Johnson. Lakoff and Johnson's most recent collaboration is entitled Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought[5] and suggests a whole different approach to charting the terrain of the moral landscape. The authors maintain that metaphors are so pervasive in our lives that they shape how we actually view our world, and so in a real sense play a key role in the construction of our "realities." How can we speak of, much less search for, cross-cultural "objective moral truth" in such a rich, metaphor-laden world?

While Lakoff and Johnson might suggest that a search for such objective moral truth is impossible, I suspect that most Christian ethicists (to speak out of my own religious tradition and convictions) would not concede the quest so easily. Nevertheless, the impact of culture, and the concomitant social sciences which study it, have to be taken more into account as we approach the theological methodology of Christian ethics. To put the matter in another way, we need to do Christian ethics today more explicitly in terms of both cross-cultural awareness of other cultures in reference to our own, as well as striving toward greater inculturation of the Gospel in whatever we identify as our own native culture.

Though much of vocabulary connected with inculturation, indigenization, or contextualization would not be coined until the last half of our century, Christianity has struggled from its earliest days with the moral ramifications arising from cross-cultural conflict.[6] In our own time, despite some misgivings and miscues, inculturation[7] clearly has established itself as a primary theological concern. While much has been done in the name

of inculturation in liturgy, art and music, biblical and dogmatic theology, to date the field of Christian ethics has tended to be rather wary of immersing itself in these potentially troubling theological waters. My operating premise is that contemporary Christian ethics, grounded in a genuine tradition of theological education, both can and must take much more seriously the challenges posed by inculturation and the ongoing development of the Church as a truly global entity. We find increasingly that as we approach the next millennium our universities, seminaries, and theological centers no longer can presume a homogeneous religious and cultural background among either students or professors. Approaches and texts which may have served a previous generation well enough are no longer adequate to the contemporary academic milieux. The challenges raised by globalization, pluralism and multiculturalism are hardly confined to the secular sphere, and if we hope to educate well our students who will become the leaders in the future, then we must provide them with the theological underpinnings and tools to make their way in a positive Christian fashion.

Operating Premises of Cross-Cultural Ethics

Rather than speak of the "inculturation" of Christian ethics, I suggest a slightly different terminology, namely doing Christian ethics from a cross-cultural perspective. Though ethics has been studied across cultures for a considerable period of time, since the term "cross-cultural ethics" does not yet enjoy a clear or common understanding, a few remarks are in order so as to articulate better what I see as involved in such an approach. First of all, to employ a via negativa, let me state what cross-cultural ethics is not. Cross-cultural ethics differs from the established academic sub-discipline of comparative ethics in

both its object and methodology. Comparative ethics is usually undertaken in one of two ways: either as an investigation of a different culture's mores, belief systems, and the like (often done within the discipline of cultural anthropology), or as an "ethical" treatment of an issue from a supposedly "neutral" (or "universalist" or "global") stance. Thus, comparative ethics in the first version is pursued chiefly as an academic "interest" object, while comparative ethics in the second instance often aims at the establishment of some common philosophical platform for discussion and/or possibly "adjudication" of concrete ethical issues that seem to involve many if not all contemporary cultures.[8] Much of the current work in the so-called globalization of ethics and human rights as the language of universal morality is an example of what I call comparative ethics in the second instance[9] and these approaches and "projects" have raised a number of significant questions[10] regarding its methodology, implicit conceptions of "culture," as well as the nettlesome issue of attempting to "compare" different cultural ethics from a standpoint which itself is never "acultural" and therefore can never claim to be completely "neutral."[11]

It is not my intent to enter at this point into a protracted debate between "comparative" versus "cross-cultural" ethics or the viability of a globalization of ethics project, but rather merely to suggest that cross-cultural ethics involves both a somewhat different object of inquiry and a concomitant methodology. First, cross-cultural ethics stresses more the concept of culture and many of its related aspects--such as ethos and ethnocentricity (and how these interact in particular ethical systems of moral reflection), enculturation (the processes by which humans become members of a given culture, and are socialized into this or that moral community) and acculturation (i.e., the process of cross-

cultural interaction--which is sometimes violent--and the resulting changes which take place in all the parties involved in these interactions).[12] Second, an ethics done from a cross-cultural perspective must pay special attention to developing a better dialogue process as part of its fundamental methodology. This cross-cultural dialogue is necessary so that each culture can have its say, without being prejudiced or forced into a conceptual framework of another culture's ethical tradition, which in turn may obscure and/or distort the insights which the first culture has to offer. These cultural frameworks contain many of what Karl Rahner terms "global pre-scientific convictions," which often tend to be "smuggled (hineingechmuggelt)" into the discussion in such a way that often the data selected and used are done in a way that skews the information utilized, and in turn leads to incomplete and/or imperfect ethical "conclusions."[13]

As one means of trying to avoid the pitfalls of our global pre-scientific convictions while achieving a better cross-cultural communication, I propose entering into a process of what Robert Schreiter terms “inter-cultural hermeneutics.” Schreiter describes cross-cultural communication as the ability both to speak and to understand across cultural boundaries, which involves the lack of a common world shared by both the speaker and the hearer. Such cross-cultural communication then presumes an intercultural hermeneutics which “explores the conditions that make communication possible across cultural boundaries. It also presses the questions of the nature of meaning and of truth under those circumstances.” [14] Now it is obvious that cross-cultural ethics seen in this mode will have to navigate between the Scylla of moral relativism, in which the existence of trans-cultural and trans-historical moral order of values and norms is effectively denied, and the Charybdis of ethical imperialism, in which

one culture absolutizes its whole world-view, mores, customs, etc. and seeks to impose it on other cultures.[15] It is the methodology itself of cross-cultural ethics that becomes the map for intercultural communication and collaboration. My proposed methodology proceeds from a basic question similar to that raised by Amy Gutman: "Can people who differ in their moral perspectives nonetheless reason together in ways that are productive of greater ethical understanding?"[16] Obviously I posit an affirmative answer to this question, and propose that cross-cultural ethical reflection moves by way of dialogue, which involves critical reflection and subsequent discussion, precisely towards this sort of "greater ethical understanding." In anthropological terms the result of such a cross-cultural dialogue encounter might be described as an "acculturation" of ethics.

Acculturation–the meeting of two different cultures--can be violent and negative, such as happened in many parts of the world that suffered under oppressive colonial regimes in which one culture imposed itself on the other. But there is a more benign possibility for acculturation in which the cultures meet, if not as friends at first sight, at least as respected dialogue partners. I believe that is what both Gutman and Schreiter have in mind in the processing of reasoning and speaking together. However, before members of different cultures can reason and speak together they must make concerted efforts to understand the other, to try and see the world from the other cultural member's point of view. Obviously the gaps between culture can be large, but the chasms can be bridged if the attempts for communication are moored in honest efforts at mutual learning and teaching. I hold that the starting point for this cross-cultural education project will be a certain suspension of judgment, and employment what I term the "preferential option for the other" in which those

from one culture make an intentional "preference" to presume that the "foreign" cultural system is not only intrinsically valuable in general terms, but also that in its particular manifestations there very likely is much to inform and enrich one's own culture.

More will be said on this point shortly, but in order to understand another culture better I maintain that we must approach ethics in a different way, by looking more deeply and fully into the ethos of a given culture, which in turn will help shape its ethics. Borrowing Clifford Geertz's well-known concept of "thick" description[17] I think a case can be made to suggest that historically ethics has operated more out of the framework of the contrasting term, namely an abstract "thin" description in terms of what it took into consideration methodologically, as the morally relevant factors involved in the processes of moral reflection, including what voices would be listened to in the ensuing discussion.[18] While great strides have made in recent years, especially thanks to the contributions of feminist ethics, the turn to personalism, and the increasing input of non-Western thinkers, I would argue we still need to expand our notion of what systematic ethics involves. Though I cannot develop this point in great detail here, I would suggest that as a first step we need to expand our operative understanding of culture and take greater pains to integrate ethical reflection into culture, rather than to presume to start with an abstract, universalist model of "ethics" and then seek to account for cultural varieties and particularities. Schreiter makes this same point asserting that

> approaches based on propositional and referential notions of truth do not reach far enough. It has been noted that, alongside the integrity of the

message, the identity of the hearers or the hearing community also has to be taken into account. So understood, truth may not be able to be extracted propositionally as a way of arriving at truth-claim candidates. Truth is embedded in the narratives of living communities.[19]

The methodological presupposition of cross-cultural ethics might also be expressed with a computer metaphor of "interface." Interface is the process and the ability of one computer program to access and work with another program. In cross-cultural ethics the aim of interface is achieved first through establishing a basis for dialogue and then moving through this cross-cultural dialogue to authentic inter-cultural communication. If communication though is going to be in-depth, then it must communicate "culturally" and this cultural communication will necessarily cover a wide range of issues, opinions, beliefs, customs, mores, myths, stories, as well as what are held ethically in language of "moral norms" and the "natural law." A cross-cultural ethical methodology which allows for interface with both the thick and a thin cultural descriptions is necessary for valid, in-depth communication in cross-cultural ethics. As in-depth cross-cultural communication takes place both parties in the dialogue with learn and change.

To return briefly to a comparison with comparative ethics, cross-cultural ethics involves a different perspective in terms of both the aims and the premises. It is precisely the area of concrete moral discourse which lies between "thick" and "thin" which is often most difficult to navigate from the perspective of comparative ethics. While comparative ethics can enumerate and study points of convergence and divergence on a range of issues, larger ethical

world-views and the like, there remains a nagging methodological difficulty: just where is the ground on which one stands to undertake these comparative studies? What individuals or group would serve as the "acultural" neutral or impartial "control" in this sort of study? Furthermore, what moral norms can serve as a standard or benchmark for concrete comparative ethics? Now this is not meant to argue either towards epistemological fatalism or absolute moral relativism. There definitely is a value in establishing and refining certain standards of moral normativity, such as human rights discourse. I have adopted the term "lowest common denominator" ethics to describe this sort of moral discourse. It should be clearly understood that the term is not pejorative; just as it is rather difficult to do equations which involve fractions without finding a common term, in the same way in complex human undertakings such as human rights, gender equality, global economics and the like, we absolutely need a set of common norms which will function as our lowest common denominators.

My approach of cross-cultural ethics suggests at least two important conclusions: first, that a certain plurality of views on important moral concepts such as the common good, the natural law, virtue, duty, etc. is a positive value in itself, rather than an obstacle to be overcome, side-stepped, or obliterated, and second, that a process of cross-cultural dialogue based on mutual respect for the various cultures will facilitate the cultivation of the richness of this moral pluralism. If such an approach is adopted and followed then ethical pluralism itself can be transformed and we shall be able to move from a pluralism of "co-existence" in which several moral outlooks exist along-side one another, and whose primary moral claim is for mutual tolerance, to a healthier pluralism whose central value is better expressed by the

metaphor of "cross-fertilization." Through ethical cross-fertilization[20] a fuller understanding of the richness and complexity of the moral world would develop both within individual cultures as well as across cultures.[21] For example, from living in the Confucian culture of Korea I think I now have a deeper understanding of what “filial piety” involves in terms of mutual care and respect that parents have for their children and children show their parents. My experience of living in Korea did not make me think like Koreans, but clearly I think about these sorts of issues in ways different from the American who left Milwaukee for Seoul, and that experience has not just changed me, but enriched and added to my lived understanding in the ethics of family relationships.

Besides increasing our grasp of the richness and complexity of the moral world, the cross-fertilization involved in cross-cultural ethics can help correct some persistent and tenacious problems connected with the darker side of any culture's moral world-view and ethical values and practices. Ethics never exists simply and merely as a philosophical system, but is always embodied in a particular cultural ethos. The ethos in turn has both positive and negative aspects: the positive aspects support and facilitate our moral living, but the negative aspects are often difficult to see clearly, not to mention to avoid. In theological terms we could speak of the negative dimension of ethos as involving aspects of original sin. Though ethnocentrism may be a bit like original sin in that it is inborn and to some extent irremovable, this fact does not condemn us to a moral fatalism or determinism. However, we do need to take special pains to mitigate its negative effects, and this frankly has been for far too long a neglected aspect of methodology in ethics.[22] In this respect the mutual exchange envisioned by cross-cultural ethics can play an important role in both identifying our individual and

collective moral blind spots and challenging us to heed voices we otherwise might tend to discount.

An Academic Approach to Teaching Cross-Cultural Ethics

While more, obviously, could be said on the nature of cross-cultural ethics, I turn now to sketch out how this approach might be used in an actual classroom situation, using as a model a course I have taught now for a number of years at the graduate school/seminary level in the Graduate Theological Union (GTU)--a nine-school consortium of theological schools in Berkeley, California. The GTU is ideally located for this sort of course for several reasons. The GTU's academic population has become increasingly international. My own member school of the GTU (The Jesuit School of Theology-at-Berkeley [JSTB]) in the last academic year counted students from six continents and forty-three countries, as well several non-native faculty. Since most of the member schools of the GTU are located very close to one another there is a good deal of cross-registration and ecumenical interchange and collaboration on a variety of levels. This academic environment which is marked so strongly by internationality and ecumenism is a key asset in pursuing cross-cultural Christian ethics because it affords the valuable opportunity to do theological reflection in a context that closely resembles many of the pastoral situations with which the Church is currently faced. Today few of our students, of whatever denominational stripe, can or should presume a homogenous sectarian or denominational environment in which to work after their studies are completed, so studying in this sort of ecumenical and multi-cultural environment helps them to learn to think more

ecumenically and cross-culturally, as well as to practice a certain amount of dialogue and collaboration with others of different religious and cultural traditions.

The course I teach is entitled "Cross-Cultural Christian Ethics" and I limit it to eighteen students to foster better interaction and dialogue. I have been fortunate in that the participants in the course have been representative of our larger student population, both ecumenically and ethnically. I count on this diversity because a major requirement for the course, as well as one of its principal learning experiences, is for each student to link up with one or two others who come from different ethnic and denominational backgrounds and to present a common presentation on some aspect of cross-cultural Christian ethics to the entire class. These presentations are scheduled in the final third of the semester, and I will say more about them below.

Since a good part of doing cross-cultural ethics involves process, it is paramount to create a classroom environment which will facilitate an inter-active dialogue of respectful yet honest critical discussion. I begin the first meeting with a personal introduction in which I share with students some my own experiences from living abroad for a number of years,[23] as well as past experiences teaching this course. I then ask them in turn to introduce themselves at some length, and express what they hope to get out of the course. This round of introductions invariably is a very positive experience and does a lot to set a helpful tone for the semester, as well as to underscore the element of dialogue.

Since learning the process of cross-cultural dialogue is indispensable for the whole course I spend some time discussing the nature of dialogue itself. Theologically, dialogue is grounded in the belief that God has already been long at work in the dialogue partners

(whether individuals, groups, or cultures), and so dialogue itself becomes an integral part of the process of finding God's presence in the other(s). Articulation of this theological premise in a certain provides a faith-based motivation not only for establishing the possibility of such a common, dialogical search for the truth, but also issues a mandate to undertake the task itself. When the dialogue involves individuals who may differ culturally but share a common faith, then efforts to share that common faith with each other in turn furnishes a common ground for continuing and deepening the cross-cultural learning/teaching process.

From a methodological standpoint dialogue involves both a giving and a receiving and presumes something to teach and to learn. Dialogue therefore is a true art, but one which involves not just a process, but an antecedent conversion to the process itself, before one can become adept at this art of dialogue. To paraphrase Wittgenstein, knowing a language means not knowing just what to “say” but how to go on. In this process of “going on” I use some of the insights of the well-known Asian theologian, C.S. Song, who points out that genuine dialogue does not necessarily happen all at once when two parties of good will sit down to talk to one another. Song identifies seven stages that each dialogue party will most likely have to go through before reaching the point where actual effective dialogue can begin.[24] Briefly summarized, Song suggests that this dialogue must move from a starting point of ethno or religio-centrism to the recognition that our own religious--cultural experiences are not the sum of all possible truth. Ultimately this recognition leads to the stage Song calls "Blessed Ignorance," in which the participants' conviction that they in fact do not know the total truth of the matter at hand allows for real dialogue to begin. Mistakes and miscues are bound to occur in the dialogical process and therefore patience, understanding and

forgiveness are required among all dialogue parties.[25] As a practical way of facilitating this conversion to dialogue and fostering cross-cultural exchange of views I divide the students up into groups of four or five to discuss the assigned weekly readings during the first 45 minutes of each three-hour class period, and I move from group to group to participate as well.

Following the introductions and excursus on the nature of dialogue I then describe the course aims, the syllabus, requirements, etc. For both a theological introduction to inculturation and especially the concept of inter-cultural communication and hermeneutics I have the students read and discuss Robert Schreiter's recent book mentioned above before moving into consideration of our different representatives of ethics. The models I use can be differentiated geographically, culturally, and confessionally. The authors I currently use include Laurenti Magesa and Chinua Achebe for Africa,[26] Antônio Moser and Bernardino Leers for Latin America,[27] C.S. Song[28] for Asia, and Roger Betsworth for the United States.[29] Magesa, Moser and Leers are Roman Catholic, while Song and Betsworth are Protestant.[30] A key premise behind the selection of these different models is that there is no such thing as "context-free" or "universal" Christian ethics or moral theology. Thus, I assert that the situation out of which each author writes influences not only his or her basic approach, but also will highlight certain issues and resources as being of greater importance than others.

Magesa is especially concerned with the particular ethical and theological challenges Christianity must meet in Africa (e.g., the role of the African ancestor, polygamy, etc.) and he seeks to highlight African religious traditions as a positive resource for approaching ethics

in that continent. While in Latin America secularization does not present the same challenges than it might in Europe or the United States, Antônio Moser and Bernardino Leers seek an approach to Christian ethics which treats the fundamental themes of the discipline in a fashion which is sensitive to the socio-economic context of Latin America, i.e., a model of liberation ethics. Liberation is also an important theme in East Asia, but C.S. Song stresses that what is required first is a whole new way of conceiving of, and doing theology. Building on insights drawn from a theology of the creation and incarnation, Song calls for doing theology in Asia with Asian sources. He asserts that European theology has been exported for far too long to Asia, and this factor has contributed to the "foreign-ness" with which Christianity is regarded in many places throughout that continent. Conversely, a theological methodology which learns to find the presence of the Spirit of God in Asian culture and history will have a far greater chance of winning a hearing and evangelizing people from around Asia.

Finding an adequate single representative ethician for the United States is no easy task, and my selection of Betsworth departs a bit from the models of the previous theologians. In his book Betsworth uses the concept of "cultural narratives" to describe and evaluate different moral models which have functioned in the American ethos, and highlights four principal "stories" that have shaped our collective moral self-understanding: 1) The Biblical Covenant Community of the Puritans; 2) The Gospel of Success (Franklin, Carnegie, Social Darwinism, etc.); 3) The Story of Therapeutic Well-being and Consumerism; and 4) The Mission of America, which is seen especially clearly in the history of American foreign policy.

I use Betsworth's book before turning to the other ethical models since it provides a good touchstone for subsequent discussion and reflection. While not all of my students are

Americans, they are all at least residents for the moment in the United States, and thus they all have a lived experience of this particular culture (which in itself is cross-cultural precisely because not everyone is a native). Betsworth is particularly helpful for introducing the key concepts of cultural narrative and ethos critique. While Betsworth does not use the expression “ethos critique,” he does show well how a society's cultural narratives tend to function one way for the dominant members of a group (the "insiders") and a different way for those who are marginalized ("the outsiders"). Betsworth tries to look at each of the dominant cultural narratives from both perspectives, and the resulting reflections complement well the approach of cross-cultural ethics and his overall presentation gives a good framework to read and discuss the other authors used.

An understanding of the concepts of “thick” and “thin” description, cultural narrative and ethos critique is very helpful for the students as they move to the selection and preparation of their small group presentations. In the second class meeting I give a brief audio visual presentation using slides, music, and some art work drawn from the West and three Chinese scroll paintings of some calligraphy, a landscape scene, and a shoot of bamboo. I work with the students to concentrate on the basic iconography, namely, the cultural symbols embedded in the work which would be evident to those within the given culture, but which might be either misinterpreted or not understood at all by those outside that culture. I ask the Asian students to be silent for the moment, as the rest of the class struggles to decode the various meanings. The calligraphy of course is clearly a “mystery” to them, and so it must be “translated” before any attempt at deeper understanding can be initiated. The landscape and bamboo scrolls seem initially to be “interpretable” but the deeper range of

moral meanings is usually lost on the non-Asian students,[31] and therefore for fuller understanding the Asian students must supply some of the cultural background necessary for a true and full understanding. This exercise works very well at helping the students see first hand the partiality of their own vision, as well as the necessity of dialogue and input from other cultures in order to see what is really out there. I also encourage the students to go out together and visit local museums during the course to try to look again through different lenses to see what might have been overlooked before.

Towards the beginning of the course I also give a detailed lecture on what constitutes both a methodology and the "fonts" or sources or Christian ethics (Scripture, Tradition, Reason, and Experience), modes of moral discourse, as well as how all these interact with one another.[32] About one-third of the way into the semester I ask the students to write a short reflection paper on how they personally use the major sources of Christian ethics, as well as what characterizes their own individual cultural ethos and narrative. I do not "grade" these papers, but do make marginal comments, raise questions, and so on. As I return these papers I ask the students to begin to settle on a partner(s) with whom their small group presentation will be done. Since the course is on "cross-cultural" ethics I ask that as far as possible the partner(s) come from a different cultural and/or religious background. Once these pairings have been arranged, I suggest that the reflection papers be shared with the partner and that they begin to discuss what might be a possible topic and approach. In order to facilitate this process I meet with each group individually and suggest refinement of the thesis of the presentation, as well as possible approaches, resources, bibliography, etc. In order to encourage the students and facilitate the small group dynamics I break the students up into

groups of five or six to discuss the weekly reading assignments for about 45 minutes of each three hour class period. I have found that such small-group discussions on the readings throughout the course is a good way of not only making sure that everyone is able to have her say, but also these groups force the individuals to confront and work through differing convictions and opinions–whether they be cross-culturally based or not.

The small group presentations almost without exception turn out very well. In the class meeting preceding the group's own presentation they give an article or two (or a book chapter) to be read by all to prepare the other students for the topic or theme of the presentation. Reading of these articles also makes the subsequent presentation more interactive and collaborative. The presentation itself takes around an hour, and then roughly a half-hour is devoted to discussion by the whole class. A complete list would be rather lengthy, but by way of example I would highlight a few particular projects. One group of four (an Anglo-American, Hispanic American, Nigerian, and Korean) dealt with "Cross-Cultural Conflict Resolution" by using case studies from each of their respective cultures. The presenters divided the rest of the entire class into four groups: each group was given a "conflict resolution case study" which came from a culture different from that of the members of the particular group. The "native" presenter of each case sat in on the group to answer questions for clarification and the like, and to observe how the group tried to resolve the case. The group itself though was responsible for self-facilitation and resolving the case. This was a most effective exercise in identifying a good number of cultural presuppositions, as well as highlighting certain embedded and largely unquestioned modes of moral "reasoning" which function in the various cultures. Another group of three women students researched how the

concept of the "virtuous woman" functioned in American and Korean societies, and what implications this might raise cross-culturally for first and second generation Korean--Americans in the United States. Another presentation involved the participation of a half-Chinese, half-American student, a Tlingit student from Alaska, and an Italian-American in which they investigated how Chinese and Tlingit (a matri-lineal tribal society) approach the idea of transracial and/or transcultural adoptions (i.e., when the child adopted differs from either the race or culture of the adoptive parents). This presentation uncovered how a strong ethos, ethnocentrism, and racism are embedded in these cultures. A fourth project done by a man from mainland China and a Japanese--American woman looked at some of the contemporary examples of issues and discourse surrounding "human rights" and raised some questions concerning the Western cultural premises which underlie much of this discourse, as well as suggesting "translation" and application difficulties these cultural formulations cause in several Asian societies.

Feedback from the students on the anonymous course evaluations conducted on the final day of class has been extremely positive. The students report that they have gained from the course a greater understanding of the breadth of complexity of what ethics involves, a greater awareness of what the sources and resources are for Christian ethics, and a certain confidence in identifying, using and integrating these resources in both their pastoral ministry and ongoing theological reflection. Invariably the students also highlight that one of the major things they have "learned" or received from the whole course experience is a much deeper insight into their own culturally-based (and biased) world-views. They realize that so many of their values, opinions, thought processes are largely taken for granted. The students

increasingly recognize that culture is inexorably intertwined with their own individual and corporate world-views, i.e., the way they perceive reality and the framework out of which they reflect, judge, act, and feel. The entire course, but especially the cross-cultural dialogue involved in preparing for the small group presentation, stimulates and forces them to re-examine many of the ethnocentrically-shaped presuppositions, or what Rahner calls our "global pre-scientific convictions," which so often hinder and skew our ethical reasoning. Through the cross-cultural process introduced by the course the students come to see a bit better their own global pre-scientific convictions, and therefore realize that a good deal of re-visioning and re-tuning of their modes of moral perception are required.

Conclusion

In the final lecture of the course I briefly review the students' own presentations and use examples from them to underscore one last time the theoretical points concerning a methodology for doing cross-cultural Christian ethics. One important aspect of this methodology is what I call "charting the terrain" in order to look realistically at our world to identify not only the moral possibilities for ethical action, but also to locate some of the obstacles and pitfalls as well. Certainly ethnocentricity, a false or overly-facile moral "universality" of global ethics, superficial multiculturalism, parochialism, ethical colonialism and/or a tyrannical political correctness are all hazards that must be charted if we hope to navigate around them.

Christian ethics as done in the various Roman Catholic and Protestant traditions has consistently sought to aid not only the members of the Church in their moral reflection and

action, but also to further this same enterprise among all men and women of good will in the entire world. If our Christian ethics hopes to continue in this tradition then it must take into greater account culture as the fundamental mode of being human in the concrete world. Such a recognition will require a methodology which makes better use of the social sciences, and especially insights garnered from cultural anthropology. An ethics which is more "culturally" informed will have to reflect more on how the aspects of culture enumerated above relate to one another in our creation and exposition of moral discourse. A cross-cultural methodology must include criteria to safeguard and respect the basic cultural integrity of each participant culture, which in turn necessitates an ongoing process of dialogue in order to foster both Christian inculturation within a given culture and cross-cultural communication and reciprocal moral enrichment among cultures.

Finally, by way of summarizing these criteria, I would highlight four indispensable conditions for a methodology of cross-cultural Christian ethics. The first condition would be the dialogical conversion I discussed briefly above. In order to enter into this sort of dialogue we must humbly admit that definitely we do not have all the answers, and that our way of seeing something is not the only way. An intrinsic part of this conversion to dialogue is accepting and believing our partners as <u>equals</u> in the conversation, and this means we must be ready to listen as well as to speak.

The second condition I see as absolutely necessary is coming to learn the other culture on its own terms, by utilizing both a “thick” description of ethics and what Schreiter terms intercultural hermeneutics. This will involve a combination of study and experience, done with a lot of reflection, discernment and patience. Any attempt to rush to judgment will most

probably result in arrival at a misjudgment. Acceptance of this criterion of cultural reciprocity leads in turn to a third condition of a radical openness to accept a new approach for doing moral philosophy and/or Christian ethics than has been traditionally the case in the West. Recognition and acceptance of the possibility of doing our "moral" theology in another way is an important condition for inculturating Christian ethics, as well as developing a viable framework for cross-cultural ethics.

A final condition would be a greater respect and consideration for the sacred texts and traditions of the groups involved. In East Asia, for example, this would mean respect for, and study of, Buddhism and Confucianism.[33] A naive reading of these traditions or a simplistic acceptance or rejection of such sacred texts will only impede a genuine inculturation of Christian ethics. Yet, at the same time we must also affirm that the key sacred text for all Christians is the Bible. Like any text, the Bible is culturally conditioned and socially located, and thus poses its own considerable hermeneutical challenges. However, the Bible is also the sacred classic (to use the terminology of Gadamer and Ricouer) and Christian ethics holds that it is indispensable not only for the discipline itself but also for dialogue with people of all cultures inasmuch as every person is addressed by the by Word of God.

If these conditions are recognized and adopted then I believe we will have made an important first step in developing a coherent and practical methodology for adapting our Christian ethics to many of the challenges posed by our contemporary world. Cross-cultural ethics is not meant to supersede or replace all the other important fields of fundamental moral theology or Christian ethics. Rather, I have hoped to demonstrate simply that cross-cultural

ethics stands within the best tradition of Christian ethics and/or moral theology, and that this cross-cultural ethics is a field which merits greater attention in the future.

Abstract

Recent attention given to the globalization of ethics, the prospects for a common morality, as well as related issues such as inculturation, pluralism, and multiculturalism all provide a challenging context for critical reflection on how theological ethics can be done in light of some of these challenges. A concrete course on "Cross-Cultural Models of Christian Ethics," taught regularly at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California with participants from a diverse theological and cultural backgrounds is presented with a view to stimulate further reflection on both the theological issues connected with doing cross-cultural ethics in the Christian theological tradition as well as aiding concrete curricular development in this area.

ENDNOTES

1. Published by Harvard University Press, 1999, and reviewed by Simon Blackburn in The New York Times Book Review, 21 February 1999, p. 24.

2. Ibid., p. 153 in Scanlon's text.

3. See also the thoughtful essays contained in Prospects for a Common Morality, edited by Gene Outka and John P. Reeder (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993). Contributions come from Robert Merrihew Adams, Annette C. Baier, Alan Donagan, Margaret Farley, Alan Gewirth, David Little, Gene Outka, John P. Reeder, Jr., Richard Rorty, Jeffrey Stout, and Lee H. Yearley.

4. For a discussion of some aspects of this problematic, see James T. Bretzke, "Cultural Particularity and the Globalisation of Ethics in the Light of Inculturation," Pacifica 9 (1996): 69-86.

5. Published in New York by Basic Books, 1998, and reviewed by Edward Rothstein, The New York Times Book Review, 21 February 1999, p. 25.

6. E.g., the New Testament's evidence concerning debates over circumcision, consumption of food sacrificed to idols, and the neglect of the Greek-speaking widows in the sharing of the community's resources can all be interpreted at least to a certain degree in terms of cross-cultural conflict.

7. "Inculturation" is the term used most commonly in Roman Catholic circles, while "indigenization" and/or "contextualization" are more prevalent among Protestant theologians. Broadly speaking, these terms seem essentially synonymous, and I will limit myself to using

the single term "inculturation" to refer to this basic dynamic. For a good overview of the genesis and development of inculturation as a theological term see Nicholas Standaert, S.J.'s "L'histoire d'un néologisme: Le terme «Inculturation» dans les documents romains" Nouvelle Revue Théologique 110 (1988): 555-570.

8. One work on comparative ethics which covers both of these approaches to a certain extent is David Little and Sumner B. Twiss' Comparative Religious Ethics (New York: Harper & Row, 1978). Their work contains five chapters on "Method" and three chapters on "Application," in which these latter chapters include treatment of "Religion and Morality of the Navajo," "Religion and Morality in the Gospel of Matthew," and "Religion and Morality in Theravada Buddhism."

9. Hans Küng's project for the globalization of ethics is perhaps one of the most widely known works in this area. See his Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethic (London: SCM, 1991).

10. Many authors have raised a number of questions regarding the globalization of ethics project. For one good example, see June O'Connor, "Does a Global Village Warrant a Global Ethic? (An Analysis of A Global Ethic, the Declaration of the 1993 Parliament of the World's Religions)," Religion 24 (1994): 155-164.

11. See Felix Wilfred, "The Language of Human Rights--An Ethical Esperanto?" Vidyajyoti 56 (1992): 194-214; and Simeon O. Ilesanmi, "Human Rights Discourse in Modern Africa: A Comparative Religious Ethical Perspective," Journal of Religious Ethics 23 (1995): 293-322. See also the essays contained in Outka and Reeder, Prospects for a Common Morality.

12. For a discussion of how many of these cultural concepts can function in a fuller understanding of Christian ethics see, James T. Bretzke, "Cultural Particularity and the Globalisation of Ethics in the Light of Inculturation," Pacifica 9 (1996): 69-86.

13. Rahner's own words are worth citing here: "In order to substantiate moral precepts, proofs, often very rigourous and subtle, are adduced; and yet we gain the impression that these proofs tacitly and without reflection really assume from the outset the very conclusion at which they aim, that the conclusions are, so to speak, smuggled [hineingechmuggelt] into the premises of the argument (in good faith, of course) and that the proofs are convincing only to someone who was convinced of what was to be proved even before any proof was forthcoming." Karl Rahner, "On Bad Arguments in Moral Theology," in idem, Theological Investigations, 18 (New York: Crossroad, 1984): 74.

14. Robert J. Schreiter, The New Catholicity: Theology between the Global and the Local (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997): 28. This book is a revised edition of lectures given at the University of Frankfurt in 1995. See also his first chapter, "Globalization and the Contexts of Theology" for some excellent reflections on the process of globalization involved in contemporary theologies.

15. Since those who find themselves navigating these troubled waters are often accused of drifting towards either one or the other of these hazards, let me underscore that my proposal for cross-cultural ethics does not call into question the traditional assertion of the existence of an objective and universal moral order (repeated in any number of recent documents, such as John Paul II's Veritatis splendor). Clearly, cross-cultural ethics does not suppose a position of ethical relativism, in which moral truths, goodness, norms, etc., change from right

to wrong or good or bad depending solely on cultural factors. Rather, cross-cultural ethics simply highlights epistemological limitations and conditions about the knowability of the objective universal moral order. In other words, cross-cultural ethics may call into question some of our assertions about conclusions based on this universal moral order. For example, a natural law ethics, such as that used traditionally in Roman Catholic moral theology, stresses what is supposedly common to all humans in each age and place. However, this classic natural law approach tends to overlook or minimize the foundational aspect of the essential particularity of any and every culture, and the historical and cultural aspects of the employment of the natural law itself also have been under-emphasized. Our study of history also reveals that at times throughout the centuries natural law arguments have been invoked to support some so-called "universal" moral norms which we now realize more clearly were actually cultural mores tied to a particular time and place.

16. Amy Gutman in the preface to Charles Taylor's Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition, rev. ed., ed. and introduced by Amy Gutman; with commentary by K. Anthony Appiah, Jürgen Habermas, Steven C. Rockefeller, Michael Walzer, and Susan Wolf (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992, 1994): xiii.

17. Cf. Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," in id., The Interpretation of Cultures (New York: Basic Books, 1973): 3-30. Geertz himself borrows the terms “thick” and “thin” from Gilbert Ryle, drawing on the latter’s discussion of a conspiratorial wink. From the perspective of a “thin” description the wink could be described as a rapid contracting of the eyelids, but obviously from the “thick” perspective the wink involves a deliberate act intended for someone in particular, to impart a particular

message, done according to culturally established code, and so forth (pp. 6-7). Moving to ethnography a thick description will have to look at "a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit, and which [the investigator] must contrive somehow first to grasp and then to render (p. 10)." I assign Geertz's essay to my students in the first week of class. It is important to keep in mind, however, that "thick" is not necessarily "better" than "thin"; rather, the terms highlight the processes of investigation and subsequent modes of evaluation which will tend to result if one chooses one approach over the other.

18. Thick and thin are concepts which, even if a bit "fuzzy," have nevertheless established themselves in the academy. See for example Michael Walzer's Thick and Thin: Moral Arguments at Home and Abroad (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994) and Russell B. Connors, Jr. "Thick and Thin: An Angle on Catholic Moral Teachings." Louvain Studies 21 (1996): 336-355. Connors uses Geertz's concept of "thick" description, and the contrasting notion of "thin" description, to describe and evaluate how Catholic social and sexual moral teachings are often presented, what factors are considered morally relevant, and what sorts of prescriptions are laid down based on a moral calculus derived from either a "thick" or "thin" description of the moral issue. The whole tradition of casuistry related to the notion of "intrinsically evil acts" (immoral regardless of intention and circumstances) would be a good example of a "thin description" approach to moral calculus.

19. Schreiter, p. 41.

20. By "cross-fertilization" I mean something akin to Jeffrey Stout's notion of moral creole, which he develops in his Ethics after Babel: The Languages of Morals and Their Discontents

(Boston: Beacon Press, 1988).

21. For an example of this sort of cross-cultural investigation see James T. Bretzke, "The Common Good in a Cross-Cultural Perspective: Insights from the Confucian Moral Community" in Religion, Ethics & the Common Good, Annual Publication of the College Theology Society, 41, ed. James Donahue and Theresa Moser (Mystic CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1996.): 83-105.

22. However, for a recent work which does begin to address this issue I do have my students read Dean Brackley's "A Radical Ethos" Horizons 24 (Spring 1997): 7-36. Brackley discusses the "traditional" ethos which is common to many of the agrarian cultures of Latin America, the "liberal" of the industrialized north, and then proposes of "radical" ethos which would address many of the problematic aspects of both of these ethoses. While the article is for delineating what an ethos involves and how it functions in a given culture, Brackley's proposal for a "radical" ethos is a bit underdeveloped and rather too simplified.

23. For a decade I studied, lived and taught in both Asia and Europe.

24. See C.S. Song, "The Seven Stages of Dialogical Conversion," Ch. 7 of his Tell Us Our Names: Story Theology from an Asian Perspective (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1984): 121-141.

25. In this context I refer to Ignatius of Loyola's well-known "Presupposition of Good Will by the Other," in which he suggests practical ways in which one should strive to put the best possible interpretation on another's words, and if a positive interpretation does not seem possible, then one should seek first to ask questions for clarification, and only if this step is not successful, to move finally to "correction," but always done in the sense of familial

charity. The text is found in Ignatius' Introductory Annotations for the Spiritual Exercises at #22.

26. In the past I used instead Bénézet Bujo's African Theology in Its Social Context, trans. John O'Donahue (Maryknoll: Orbis Press, 1992), but I changed to Magesa's African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1997) at the suggestion of one of my African students who felt the latter book presented the African traditions better. To complement Magesa's work I have the students read Chinua Achebe's novel about African tribal life, Things Fall Apart (New York: Anchor/Doubleday, 1959). Use of such literature complements the "thick" description approach to ethics, and furthermore, I argue that this novel can also be interpreted as an example of cross-cultural ethical encounter.

27. Antônio Moser and Bernardino Leer, Moral Theology: Dead Ends and Ways Forward, trans. Paul Burns (Wellwood: Burns & Oates; Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1990). The authors write from Brazil. I chose this work primarily because it attempts a systematic treatment of Christian ethics by using a revised genre of a manual of moral theology, and thus is an exercise in cross-cultural ethics in itself to a certain extent.

28. I have used a number of C.S. Song's works, such as Theology from the Womb of Asia, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1986). This semester I am using his latest book, The Believing Heart: An Invitation to Story Theology (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1999). Song is more of a systematic theologian, but his works have a number of strong ethical themes and concerns. In years past I also used Shusaku Endo's famous novel, Silence, trans., William Johnston (New York: Taplinger Publishing Company, 1969). This novel is set in 17th century Japan and uses a story of Christian persecution to show some of the serious difficulties

involved in trying to inculturate Christianity in Japan. Like Achebe's Things Fall Apart the novel highlights cross-cultural dilemmas.

29. Roger Betsworth, Social Ethics: An Examination of American Moral Traditions (Louisville: Westminster, John Knox Press, 1990).

30. In addition to the books by these authors I incorporate added approaches and viewpoints by including articles by Dean Brackley, Leonardo Boff, Margaret Farley, Josef Fuchs, Clifford Geertz, and Jamie Phelps. The students themselves assign an additional article or chapter to be read by the entire class in preparation for the individual student presentations (discussed below). These student-assigned readings bring in yet more views, and have helped me expand and update my own syllabus of readings for subsequent renditions of the course.

31. The bamboo, for example, is a common symbol of moral rectitude in Asian art. This sort of scroll is often used not merely for "decoration" but for meditation and contemplation in the process of ongoing moral self-cultivation.

32. My methodology is based substantially on the work of the well-known ethicist James Gustafson, who in turn bases his approach on what is usually called the "Wesleyan Quadrilateral," and which model is now very widely used by increasing numbers of Christian ethicists (both Protestant and Roman Catholic) around the world. I also summarize for my students Gustafson's helpful book, Varieties of Moral Discourse: Prophetic, Narrative, Ethical, and Policy (Grand Rapids: Calvin College and Seminary, 1988), in which he outlines four types of moral discourse: prophetic, narrative, ethical, and policy, and discusses the strengths and weaknesses of each. Gustafson's basic point is that no one mode of discourse

is sufficient for ethics, and that all four have to be employed. This insight is particularly important for our students to grasp as they move from personal commitment to ethics (which often is expressed in prophetic and narrative modes) into theoretical analysis (the “ethical” mode), and finally on to concrete application (policy discourse). I have found that often the temptation of the students is to stay with just one or two of these modes and to neglect the others.

33. For additional reflections on this point see Hendrik M. Vroom "Religious Hermeneutics, Culture and Narratives," Studies in Interreligious Dialogue 4 (1994): 189-213.