VI. Conclusion

John Locke and a number of other commentators in the modern world have persuasively argued that human effort and creativity, not basic natural resources, are primarily responsible for most of the value of the wealth enjoyed in the modern world. This poses an immediate problem for the Catholic understanding of property, which in its classic form is based on the presumption that the obligations of owners of property are rooted in the character of the material world, created by God and ordained to meet human needs. If only a small proportion of the total wealth of the typical citizen of the industrialized world today is attributable to such natural resources, then the moral restrictions imposed by the classic doctrine of property might seem not to apply to most of people’s wealth today.

Efforts have been made, quite notably by Pope John Paul II, to recognize the role of creativity and effort in economic production and to broaden the doctrine of property to include not only natural resources but also the fruits of human effort and creativity. This article has argued, however, that such efforts are far from complete. Catholic moral theology must articulate the obligations of all property owners to those whose needs are unmet, but it simply cannot treat an individual’s creativity in the same way it treats an acre of farmland. For a similar reason it would seem that the fruits of that creativity ought not be treated as are the fruits of the land.

The ultimate resolution of this problem will require the cooperation of scholars in a number of fields including social ethics, fundamental moral theology, Christian anthropology, and biblical exegesis. Only a preliminary outline of a constructive development in this direction is indicated here; there is much work to be done.

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

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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, with participants from 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.

I. 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 Other1 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.


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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 postmodern world critics of the Enlightenment tradition have raised so many fundamental questions that these really need not be rehearsed here. Suffice it to 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 an awareness of other cultures than our own, and a striving toward greater inculturation of the gospel in whatever we identify as our own native culture.

Though much of the vocabulary connected with inculturation, indigenization, or contextualization would not be coined until the latter 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 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 Catholic Church as a truly global entity. We find increasingly that as we approach the next millennium our universities, seminaries, and theological centers can no longer presume a homogeneous religious and cultural background among either students or professors. Approaches and texts that may have served a previous generation well enough are no longer adequate to the contemporary academic milieu. 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.

II. Operating Premises of Cross-Cultural Ethics

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

\(^{2}\) Ibid., 153.


\(^{4}\) Contributions come from Robert Merrihew Adams, Annette C. Baier, Alan Donagan, Margaret Farley, Alan Gewirth, David Liddle, Gene Outka, John P. Reeder, Jr., Richard Rorty, Jeffrey Stout, and Lee H. Yearley.


\(^{6}\) E.g., the New Testament’s evidence concerning debates over circumcision, consumption of food sacrificed to idols, and the neglect of the Creek-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. 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., “L’histoire d’un néologisme: Le terme ‘inculturation’ dans les documents romains,” *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 110 (1988): 555-70.
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. The latter in turn, may obscure and/or distort the insights that 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 data are often selected and used in a way that skews the information utilized, leading to incomplete and/or imperfect ethical ‘conclusions.’”

As one means of trying to avoid the pitfalls posed by our global pre-scientific convictions, while achieving a better cross-cultural communication, I propose entering into a process of what Robert Schreiter terms “intercultural hermeneutics.” Schreiter describes cross-cultural communication as the ability both to speak and to understand across cultural boundaries. This ability assumes the lack of a common world shared by speaker and hearer. Such cross-cultural communication further assumes an intercultural hermeneutics that “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.” 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 a 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 world view—mores, customs, etc.—and seeks to impose it on other cultures. The

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anthropology), or as an “ethical” treatment of an issue from a supposedly “neutral” (“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 possible “adjudication” of concrete ethical issues. These issues seem to involve many if not all contemporary cultures. Much of the current work in the so-called globalization of ethics and human rights is an example of what I call comparative ethics of the second type. These approaches and “projects” have raised a number of significant questions regarding method, implicit conceptions of “culture,” and the nettlesome issue of attempting to “compare” different cultural ethics. This is normally done from a standpoint which itself is never “acultural” and therefore can claim to be completely “neutral.”

It is not my intent to enter upon a protracted debate between “comparative” and “cross-cultural” ethics or the viability of a globalization of ethics project, but rather to suggest that cross-cultural ethics involves a somewhat different object of inquiry than comparative and a concomitant methodology. First, it stresses more the concept of culture and many of its related aspects. Among these are 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 changes that take place in the parties involved in these interactions). Second, an ethics done

8One 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,” the latter chapters including treatment of “Religion and Morality of the Navajo,” “Religion and Morality in the Gospel of Matthew,” and “Religion and Morality in Theravada Buddhism.”

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


12For a discussion of how many of these cultural concepts can function in a fuller understanding of Christian ethics, see Bretzke, Cultural Particularity and the Globalization of Ethics in the Light of Inculturation.
methodology itself of cross-cultural ethics 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 mental perspectives nonetheless reason together in ways that are productive of greater ethical understanding?" I posit an affirmative answer to this question, and propose that cross-cultural ethical reflection moves by way of dialogue that involves critical reflection and subsequent discussion, precisely toward "greater ethical understanding." In anthropological terms the result of such a cross-cultural dialogue might be described as an "accommodation" of ethics.

Acculturation—the meeting of two different cultures—can be violent and negative. That is what 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 Gutman and Schreiter have in mind in describing the process of reasoning and speaking together. Before members of different cultures can reason and speak together, however, they must make concerted efforts to understand the other, to try to see the world from the other cultural member's point of view. Obviously the gaps between cultures can be large, but the chasms can be bridged if the attempts for communication are moored in honest efforts at mutual learning and teaching. The starting point for this cross-cultural education project will be a certain suspension of judgment and employment of what I term the "preferential option for the other." In it, those from one culture make an intentional "preference" of presumption that the "foreign" cultural system is not only intrinsically valuable, but that in its particular manifestations there is likely much to inform and enrich one's own culture.

More will be said on this shortly, but in order to understand another culture I maintain that we must approach ethics in a different way. We must look more deeply into the ethos of a given culture, which in turn will help us approach its ethics. Borrowing Clifford Geertz's well-known concept of "thick" description, I think a case can be made that ethics has historically operated out of the framework of the contrasting term, namely, an abstract, "thin" description. What did it take into consideration as the morally relevant factors involved in the processes of moral reflection, including what voices would be listened to in the ensuing discussion? 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, but I would argue that we still need to expand our notion of what systematic ethics involves. As a first step, we must expand our operative understanding of culture, taking pains to integrate ethical reflection into culture rather than starting with an abstract, universalist model of "ethics" and then seeking to account for cultural varieties and particularities. Schreiter makes this 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 approach.

"See Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture" in his 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 "consipriatorial 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 a culturally established code (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" (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.

"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, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983); and Frederick T. Connors, Jr., "Thick and Thin: An Angle on Catholic Moral Teachings," Louvain Studies 21 (1998): 336-55. Connors uses Geertz's concept of "thick" description, and the contrasting notion of "thin" description to describe and evaluate the ways in which Catholic social and sexual teachings are often presented, factors that are considered morally relevant, and the sorts of prescriptions that are laid down based on a moral calculus derived from either a "thick" or "thin" description of the moral issue. The tradition of casuistry as it relates to the notion of "intrinsically evil acts" (acts morally regardless of intention and circumstances) would be a good example of a "thin" description approach to moral calculus.


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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 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. 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 intercultural communication. If communication is going to be in-depth, then it must communicate “culturally.” This cultural communication will cover a wide range of issues, opinions, beliefs, customs, mores, myths, stories, and what is espoused ethically as “moral norms” and “natural law” by whatever terms. A cross-cultural method that allows for the interface of thick and thin cultural descriptions is necessary for valid, in-depth communication in cross-cultural ethics. As such communication takes place, both parties in the dialogue will learn and change.

To return briefly to a comparison with comparative ethics, cross-cultural ethics involves a different perspective in the matter of both the aims and the premises. It is precisely the area of concrete moral discourse that lies between “thick” and “thin” which is often most difficult to navigate. While comparative ethics can enumerate and study points of convergence and divergence on ethical world views and the like, there remains a nagging methodological difficulty: what is the ground on which one stands to undertake these comparative studies? What individuals or group could 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? These queries are not meant to argue toward either epistemological fatalism or complete moral relativism. There is undoubtedly a value in establishing and refining certain standards of moral normativity such as the terms of 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 difficult to do equations that involve fractions without finding a common term, so in complex undertakings such as identifying human rights, exploring what gender equality requires, likewise global economics, we need a set of norms that will function as our lowest common denominators.

My study of cross-cultural ethics suggests at least two important conclusions: that a plurality of views on important concepts such as the common good, natural law, virtue, duty, etc., is a positive value rather than an obstacle to be overcome or side-stepped, and that a process of cross-cultural dialogue based on mutual respect will cultivate the richness of this moral pluralism. If such an approach is adopted, ethical pluralism itself can be transformed. We shall then be able to move from a pluralism of “co-existence” whose primary moral claim is for mutual tolerance to a healthier pluralism whose central value is best expressed by the metaphor of “cross-fertilization.” Through such ethical cross-fertilization a fuller understanding of the richness and complexity of the moral world will be developed, both within cultures and across cultures.²¹ For example, from living in the Confucian culture of Korea I think I have a deeper understanding of what “filial piety” involves: the 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. That experience has enriched and added to my lived understanding of 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. Ethics never exists simply as a philosophical system. It is always embodied in a particular cultural ethos. The ethos in turn has both positive and negative aspects, the positive supporting and facilitating our moral living, the negative often difficult to see not to mention avoid. In theological terms we could speak of the negative dimension of ethos as involving aspects of original sin. Ethnocentrism may be somewhat like original sin in that it is inborn and to some extent irremovable, but this fact does not condemn us to a moral fatalism or determinism. We do need, however, to take special pains to mitigate its negative effects and this has been for far too long a neglected aspect of methodology in ethics.²²

¹⁹By “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, 1988).


²²For a recent work that does begin to address this issue, I have my students read Dean Brackley, “A Radical Ethos,” Horizons 24 (Spring 1997): 7-36. Brackley discusses the “traditional” ethos common to many of the agrarian cultures of Latin America and the “liberal” of the industrialized North, then proposes a “radical” ethos which would address many of the problematic aspects of the first two. While the article is helpful 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.
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 might otherwise tend to discount.

III. An Academic Approach to Teaching Cross-Cultural Ethics

While more 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 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. Its academic population has become increasingly international. My 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 as 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, ecumenical interchange, and collaboration. This academic environment, marked so strongly by internationality and ecumenism, is a key asset in pursuing cross-cultural Christian ethics. It affords the 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 denomination, can presume a homogeneous denominational environment in which to work after their studies are completed. Studying in this ecumenical and multi-cultural environment therefore, helps them to think more ecumenically and cross-culturally, as well as to practice a certain amount of dialogue with others of different religious 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 from different ethnic and denominational backgrounds to make a common presentation on some aspect of cross-cultural Christian ethics. 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 that will facilitate an interactive dialogue of respectful yet honest critical discussion. I begin the first meeting with an introduction in which I share with students some of my experiences from living abroad for a number of years, as well as past experiences in teaching the 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 is invariably a 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 at work in the dialogue partners (whether individuals, groups, or cultures), 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 way provides a faith-based motivation not only for establishing the possibility of a common, dialogical search for the truth, but also issues a mandate to undertake the task. When the dialogue involves individuals who differ culturally but share a common faith, efforts to share that faith with each other furnishes a common ground for deepening the cross-cultural learning-teaching process.

From a methodological standpoint dialogue involves both a giving and a receiving and presumes that there is something to teach and learn. Dialogue is a true art but one that involves not just a process, rather an antecedent conversion to the process itself before one can become adept at this art. 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 must go through before reaching the point where actual effective dialogue can begin. Briefly summarized, his suggestion is that dialogue must move from a starting point of ethno- or religio-centrism to the recognition that one’s 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 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. Therefore patience, understanding, and forgiveness are required among all dia-

23 For a decade I lived, studied, and taught in both Asia and Europe.
logue parties. As a way of facilitating this conversion to dialogue and fostering cross-cultural exchange I divide the students up into small groups to discuss the assigned weekly readings and move from group to group to participate.

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 intercultural communication and hermeneutics I have the students read and discuss Robert Schrader’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, Antonio Moser and Bernardino Leers for Latin America, C. S. Song for Asia, and Roger Betsworth for the United States. Magesa, Moser, and Leers are Roman Catholic, while Song and Betsworth are Protestant.

In this context I refer to Ignatius of Loyola’s “Presupposition of Good Will by the Other” in which he suggests practical ways whereby one should strive to put the best possible interpretation on another’s words. If a positive interpretation does not seem possible, one should seek first to ask questions for clarification. Only if this step is unsuccessful should one move finally to “correction” but always do it in the sense of familial charity. The text is found in Ignatius’ Introductory Annotations for the Spiritual Exercises at §22.

In the past I have used instead Bándose Bujia’s African Theology in Its Social Context, trans. John O’Donohue (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992), but I changed to Laurenti Magesa. African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life (Maryknoll, NY: 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 (Garden City, NY: Anchor/Doubleday, 1959). Use of such literature complements the “thick” description approach to ethics. Furthermore, I argue that this novel can also be interpreted as an example of cross-cultural ethical encounter.

Antonio Moser and Bernardino Leers, Moral Theology: Dead Ends and Ways Forward, trans. Paul Burns (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 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 to a certain extent an exercise in cross-cultural ethics.

I have used a number of C. S. Song’s works, such as Theology from the Womb of Asia (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1986). This semester I am using his latest book, The Believing Heart: An Invitation to Story Theology (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1999). Song is more systematic than a moral theologian, but his works have a number of strong ethical themes and concerns. In years past I have also used Shusaku Endo’s novel, Silence, trans. William Johnston (New York: Taplinger, 1969). This novel is set in seventeenth-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.


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 assign an additional article or

premise behind the selection of these 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 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 employ African religious traditions as a positive resource for approaching ethics in that continent. While in Latin America secularization does not present the same challenges that it might in Europe or the United States, Antonio Moser and Bernardino Leers seek an approach to Christian ethics that treats the fundamental themes of the discipline in a way that is sensitive to the socio-economic context of Latin America. Their model is one of liberation ethics. Liberation is an equally 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 to Asia far too long, and this factor has contributed to the “foreign-ness” with which Christianity is regarded throughout that continent. Conversely, a theological method that finds the presence of the Spirit of God in Asian culture and history will have a far greater chance of winning a hearing and evangelizing Asian peoples.

Finding an adequate single representative ethicist for the United States is no easy task, and my selection of Betsworth departs a bit from the models of the previous theologians. Betsworth uses the concept of “cultural narratives” to describe and evaluate different moral models that have functioned in the American ethos and highlights four principal “stories” that have shaped our collective moral self-understanding: 1) The Biblical 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. My students, while not all North Americans, are all at least currently residents in the United States. Thus they have a lived experi-

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 syllabus of readings for subsequent renditions of the course.
of moral discourse, and 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 use the major sources of Christian ethics, as well as what characterizes their individual cultural ethos and narrative. I do not “grade” these papers but do make margin comments, raise questions, and so on. As I return the papers I ask the students to begin to settle on a partner(s) with whom their small group presentation will be done. The course being 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(s) and that they begin to discuss what might be a topic and approach. 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 forty-five 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 or his say, but of forcing the individuals to confront and work through their convictions and opinions—whether they be cross-culturally based or not.

The small group presentations turn out well almost without exception. In the class meeting preceding a group’s presentation the members give an article or two (or chapter in a book) to be read by all to prepare the rest for the topic or theme of the presentation. Reading of these articles makes the subsequent presentation more interactive and collaborative. The presentation itself takes around an hour, then roughly a half-hour is devoted to discussion by the class. A complete list would be rather lengthy but by way of example I will highlight a few projects. One group of four (an Anglo-American, Hispanic American, Nigerian, and Korean) dealt with “Cross-Cultural Conflict Resolution” by using case

32My methodology is based substantially on the work of the well-known ethicist James Gustafson, who in turn bases his approach on what is called by him and others the “Wesleyan Quadrilateral,” a model that is now very widely used by increasing numbers of Christian ethicists around the world. I also summarize for my students Gustafson’s helpful book, Varieties of Moral Discourse: Prophetic, Narrative, Ethical, and Policy (Grand Rapids, MI: Calvin College and Seminary, 1988), in which he outlines the four types of moral discourse, 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 students to grasp as they move from personal commitment to ethics (which often is expressed in prophetic and narrative modes), then 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 neglect the others.

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.
studies from each of their respective cultures. The presenters divided the rest of the class into four groups; each was given a “conflict resolution case study” that 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 the way in which 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 matrilineal 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 that underlie much of this discourse. The project presenters suggested “translation” and application difficulties these cultural formulations cause in several Asian societies.

Feedback from the students in the anonymous course evaluations on the final day of class has been extremely positive. They report that they have gained 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 their ongoing theological reflection and pastoral ministry. Invariably the students highlight the fact that one of the major things they have learned or received from the course experience is a much deeper insight into their own culturally-based (and biased) world views. They realize that many of their values, opinions, and thought processes are largely taken for granted. The students increasingly recognize that culture is inextricably intertwined with their own individual and corporate world views, that is, 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 presentations, stimulates them, forcing them to reexamine many of their ethnocentrically-shaped presuppositions—which 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 revisioning and retuning of their modes of moral perception are required.

IV. Conclusion

In the final lecture I briefly review the students’ presentations, using examples from them to underscore one last time the theoretical points concerning a method 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 the moral possibilities for ethical action and 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 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 worldwide. 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 that makes better use of the social sciences and especially insights gained from cultural anthropology. An ethics which is more “culturally” informed will have to reflect on how the aspects of culture enumerated above relate to one another in our creation of moral discourse and exposition of moral concepts. A cross-cultural methodology must include criteria to safeguard and respect the basic cultural integrity of each participant culture. This in turn necessitates an ongoing process of dialogue in order to foster Christian inculturation within a given culture and cross-cultural communication and 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 would be the dialogical conversion I discussed briefly above. To enter into this sort of dialogue we must humbly admit that we do not have all the answers and that our way of seeing things is not the only way. An intrinsic part of this conversion to
dialogue is accepting and believing our partners as equals in the conversation. This means we must be ready to listen as well as to speak.

The second condition I see as 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 much reflection, discernment, and patience. Any attempt to rush to judgment will probably result in arrival at a misjudgment. Acceptance of this criterion of cultural reciprocity leads to a third condition, namely of 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 inculcating 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 the Buddhist and Confucian traditions. A naïve reading of these traditions or a simplistic acceptance or rejection of such sacred texts will only impede a genuine inculcation of Christian ethics. At the same time, we must affirm that the key sacred text for all Christians is the Bible. Like any text, the Bible is culturally conditioned and socially located and this poses its own considerable hermeneutical challenges. However, the Bible is also the sacred classic (to use the terminology of Gadamer and Ricoeur), which means that Christian ethics holds it indispensable for the discipline but also for dialogue with people of all cultures. Christians believe that every person is addressed by the word of God but the task of helping others find it there is extremely delicate.

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 Christian ethics to many of the challenges posed for Christians around our contemporary world. Cross-cultural ethics is not meant to supersedes 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 it is a field that merits greater attention in the future.