

**Cross-Cultural Ethics in a Context of Pluralism & Multiculturalism:  
*Teaching Where Religion and Ethics Intersect***

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By James T. Bretzke, S.J.  
Professor of Moral Theology  
Boston College—School of Theology & Ministry  
140 Commonwealth Ave.  
Chestnut Hill, MA 02467  
E-mail: [bretzke@bc.edu](mailto:bretzke@bc.edu)

**Introduction**

A short while ago I was sitting in on a Middle School Theology Class at a private Catholic school I noticed prominently displayed on one wall a familiar poster on the “Golden Rule” as found in thirteen world religions, from Christianity to Zorasterism. Having some familiarity with several of these traditions I found the poster to be essentially accurate, and certainly the more the Golden Rule is known and practiced is all to the good. I also would acknowledge that there is a definite place for some measure of comparative ethics in all levels of our curricula, but I have become convinced that this approach alone is seriously deficient on several fronts, and ultimately does not advance us much beyond a certain superficial politically correct tolerance on one hand or articulating what I’ve termed elsewhere a “lowest common denominator” (LCD) ethics.<sup>1</sup> As any mathematician will tell you, finding the LCD is often a crucially important first step in solving more complex problems, but its discovery alone will hardly result in the ethical equivalent of a string theory for human rights, not to mention resolving the more modest challenges posed by the reality of multiculturalism and pluralism that exist in virtually every classroom today.

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<sup>1</sup> For a development of this point in relation to a possible Confucian contribution to notions of universal morality and especially human rights discourse see James T. Bretzke, S.J., “Human Rights or Human Rites?: A Confucian Cross-Cultural Perspective.” *East Asian Pastoral Review* 41/1 (2004): 44-67.

Let me begin then with a very brief discussion of what I mean by “cross-cultural ethics” and then turn to outline my own approach which I term “cross-fertilization,” which builds on the metaphor of hybridization that helps students come together to discover not only the ethical perspectives of the cultural “other,” but to become more deeply aware of how their own “global pre-scientific convictions” (Rahner) and Fundamental Values & Root Paradigms (Turner, Douglas, Geertz, et al.) shape their ethical worldviews which are necessarily conditioned by the dynamics of ethnocentrism.<sup>2</sup>

### **Cross-Cultural Ethics**

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.<sup>3</sup> Much of the work in the so-called globalization

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<sup>2</sup> For a fuller treatment of these points see James T. Bretzke, S.J., “A New Pentecost for Moral Theology: The Challenge of Inculturation of Ethics.” *Josephinum* 10:2 (Summer/Fall 2003): 250-260.

<sup>3</sup> 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,”

of ethics and human rights as the language of universal morality exemplify comparative ethics in the second instance.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately these approaches and “projects” have raised a number of significant questions<sup>5</sup> 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.”<sup>6</sup>

Leaving aside for the moment the debate between “comparative” versus “cross-cultural” ethics or the viability of a globalization of ethics project, let me 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 how ethos and ethnocentricity interact in particular ethical systems of moral reflection, enculturation or socialization and the process of cross-cultural interaction termed acculturation which can at times become quite violent and which nearly always results in changes in all the parties involved in these interactions.<sup>7</sup> An ethics done from a cross-cultural perspective must

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“Religion and Morality in the Gospel of Matthew,” and “Religion and Morality in Theravada Buddhism.”

<sup>4</sup>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).

<sup>5</sup>See for example, 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.

<sup>6</sup>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*.

<sup>7</sup>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.

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 termed "global pre-scientific convictions," which are often *hineingechmuggelt* (smuggled) into the discussion in such a way that skews data selected and used and in turn leads to incomplete and/or imperfect ethical "conclusions."<sup>8</sup>

My construction of 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 epistemology or "knowability" of the objective universal moral order. In other words, cross-cultural ethics questions in a positive, yet critical way some of our assertions about conclusions based on this universal moral order. For example, classic natural law theory either overlooked or minimized 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. Similarly, the more

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<sup>8</sup>Rahner's own words are worth citing here: "In order to substantiate moral precepts, proofs, often very rigorous 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.

contemporary interest in “virtue ethics” could be helpfully broadened by more attention to non-Western traditions.<sup>9</sup>

I use the computer metaphor of “interface” for my methodological presupposition of cross-cultural ethics. 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.” As in-depth cross-cultural communication takes place both parties in the dialogue with learn and change.

From this I draw 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 or side-stepped, 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

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<sup>9</sup> For a consideration of some Confucian contributions to virtue ethics see James T. Bretzke, S.J., "The *Tao* of Confucian Virtue Ethics." *International Philosophical Quarterly* 35 (1995): 25-41. For many more bibliographical resources see also James T. Bretzke, S.J., *Bibliography on East Asian Religion and Philosophy*. Studies in Asian Thought and Religion, 23. Lewiston NY: Mellen Press, 2001.

is better expressed by the metaphor of "cross-fertilization." Through ethical cross-fertilization<sup>10</sup> a fuller understanding of the richness and complexity of the moral world would develop both within individual cultures as well as across cultures.<sup>11</sup> For myself after living in the Confucian culture of Korea I know I have a deeper and richer understanding of what "filial piety" means. While I certainly do not think as a Korean, I do now think about these sorts of issues in ways quite different from the American who left Milwaukee for Seoul, and this has enriched and broadened 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 which are always embodied in a particular cultural ethos. This 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 classic Christian 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. 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.

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<sup>10</sup>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).

<sup>11</sup>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.

Since learning the process of cross-cultural dialogue is indispensable for the whole course I always begin by 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 utilizing an enhanced notion of dialogue as both an ethical mandate and practical virtue.

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.<sup>12</sup> 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

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<sup>12</sup>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.

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.<sup>13</sup>

### **An Academic Approach to Teaching Cross-Cultural Ethics**

While more, obviously, could be said on these foundational premises for cross-cultural ethics, I would like to turn now to one illustrative classroom situation, namely an undergraduate course I team-taught at the University of San Francisco with Tendzin Choegyal, the 15th Ngari Rinpoche and the younger brother of His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama.<sup>14</sup> Of course, a course billed as being team-taught by the “Dalai Lama’s younger brother” certainly sparked a lot of enthusiasm among the students, though certainly some came initially because of the star value of the T.C. (as he preferred to be called), and/or the notion of “spirituality” as the latest fad, as one of my students confided in a journal entry: “Too often, and especially in the pseudo-enlightened San Francisco culture, I feel as though people embrace spirituality the same way that they

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<sup>13</sup>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. 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.

<sup>14</sup> The Dalai Lama had received an honorary doctorate at USF in September, 2003 and his younger brother had acted as a sort of advance man for the visit by guest lecturing in a philosophy course the previous semester. Now “T.C.,” as he prefers to be called, indicated he’d be interested in a return visit and so he and I designed an undergraduate course, “Pathways to Wisdom,” for non-specialists which investigated three of the world’s most ancient and revered religious traditions of spiritual wisdom, namely Buddhism, Confucianism, and Christianity. He’d handle most of the Buddhism section and I’d draw on my own Korean experience and doctorate in Confucian—Christian ethics in handling the latter two traditions.

embrace healthy eating or exercise. It is something that makes their lives better, and something that makes them superior to those around them.”

Yet, as the semester progressed we got to know one another, and T.C. for himself and not just the Dalai Lama’s younger sibling. As one student wrote, “T.C. was an engaging and approachable person who appeared very human in the sense that he was not trying to be anything like his brother or that he was riding on his coattails. Instead T.C. was someone who I think gave our class another look at someone who is Buddhist, a man who has strong convictions and ties with his faith and heritage, but can also be relatable and experience human emotions and experiences that everyone has encountered once in their lives.”

In terms of the growth in the process of cross-cultural dialogue we clearly started with both eagerness and good will on both sides. As time went on the students became a bit more comfortable in raising some questions that initially they might have feared to be off-putting, such as the issue of multiple faith commitments. Responding to a question whether someone could simultaneously be a good Buddhist and a good Christian T.C. gave a strong “yes”—adding that he believed all religious traditions had great value, and that he had learned much from his own Jesuit education he had received in India after he and his family fled Tibet. This positive answer I believe helped pave the way for what could be a more troubling query: “But what about belief in reincarnation?” some of the students asked. Wouldn’t that be a core belief that a Buddhist would have to hold that would be difficult to reconcile with Christianity? T.C.’s answer was quite deft. He said, “Just think about *this* life, not the next life, and that worrying about the next life is unpractical and just speculation.” If reincarnation was just part of the “speculative” thought of Buddhism then one did not necessarily have to hold this as a formal creed to be a good Buddhist. In fact, the notion of reincarnation could be interpreted in a number of different

ways, such that we might be able to see this concept as something more closely aligned with the Christian notion of the communion of saints, giving a good concrete example of what I mean by the concept of cross-fertilization in which contact between two (or more) religious traditions helps each grow in ways that otherwise would have been considerably more difficult.

Reincarnation though was a topic that wouldn't die, and when the students asked whether he or the Dalai Lama remembered any of their past lives he said he didn't think so, and added that personally he felt he had to leave the monastic life as his reincarnated identity of 15th Ngari Rinpoche was becoming a prison for him—and thus perhaps a negative example of the Buddhist concept of attachment.

Getting rid of attachments was a key part of T.C.'s teaching, and this was another concept that dove-tailed well with the Ignatian spirituality of striving to be “indifferent” to everything but what would give God greater glory (cf. the “First Principle and Foundation” in the *Spiritual Exercises*). This concept also resonated strongly with many of the students, especially the way that T.C. spoke of overcoming negative attachment by turning it into compassion. One student expressed this insight in these words: “Learning that attachment is a negative emotion is something that will stay with me forever. When I look back on my life, I can see that so much of the pain I went through was because of the attachments I had. In class TC said, ‘When we get attached, we don't become wise’. I think this is so true. When we get attached to someone, something or someplace we lose sight of things. We forget to take care of ourselves and we become so wrapped up in something outside ourselves that we can no longer see clearly. And without that clarity it is impossible to gain insights that will help us discover our own spiritual wisdom.”

As I indicated above both acquiring the skill and navigating the terrain of cross-cultural dialogue will have both pitfalls and detours. One of these surfaced rather unexpectedly in class when a student tried to engage what Buddhist spirituality might say about homosexuality. TC shocked most of the students by responding that he considered this to be a fundamental violation of the human purposes of sexuality and certainly an obstacle, if not a perversion, of the path of spiritual cultivation. To say that this reply caused a bit of consternation would have been a major understatement, but even in this difficult moment we were able to move forward by recalling the basic premises of “conversion to dialogue” I had outlined at the beginning of the semester.<sup>15</sup> I was able to talk through this issue privately with T.C. to explain more fully how most of the students probably saw the issue, and while he still held on to his basic views he was able to return to class by articulating a deeper belief in the dignity of all persons and suggesting that this particular issue might be one of those moments which would help all the religious traditions come to a deeper understanding of what comprised true human dignity.

## **Conclusion**

At the end of the semester the students had grown in knowledge and wisdom so that while they certainly could acknowledge the common elements “Golden Rule” poster in world religions I referenced in the beginning of this paper they also were now more adept at discerning differences and even disagreements on key values in the traditions we covered.<sup>16</sup> Course evaluations were overwhelmingly positive in their assessment of the course’s impact and I

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<sup>15</sup> See also James T. Bretzke, S.J., “Conversion to Interreligious Dialogue: A Duty with the Church’s Mission.” *National Jesuit News* 33:3 (December 2003/January 2004): 2; 14.

<sup>16</sup> T.C. was not able to be with us for the whole course, and so I handled Confucianism, Taoism and Zen Buddhism on my own.

believe that each of them made real progress towards spiritual maturity, so that these words of one student could speak for many: “This course has caused me to reflect on a spiritually wise person as someone who has faith, comprehends their own religious beliefs and the beliefs of others. A spiritually wise person is not threatened by other religions traditions. They have the capacity to incorporate the beauty of other religions into their spiritual path without being overwhelmed. Overall I believe spiritual wisdom can strengthen connections between us, empower us and strengthen our views of morality.” Certainly any teacher would be happy with that kind of learning outcome, though another student I believe captured my ultimate goal of the course even better: “All of the faith traditions that we have studied in this course throughout the semester have emphasized the fact that they must be wholly integrated into life itself. Spirituality is not a light switch that we can turn on and off at a whim. It is something that must grab hold of our entire humanity and transform the way we live in this world.” And to that sentiment I believe that along with T.C. and myself most could respond with a fervent Amen!<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Many of the articles referenced in this paper by James T. Bretzke, S.J. are also available electronically on Professor Bretzke's Web-page:  
<https://www2.bc.edu/james-bretzke/BretzkeWebIndex.htm>