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A New Pentecost for Moral Theology: The Challenge of Inculturation of Ethics

Rev. James T. Bretzke, S.J.

I have come to the profession of moral theologian somewhat indirectly. My first assignment after ordination was to Sogang University in Seoul, Korea—an institution founded by the Americans of my home Province but in the process of changeover to Korean leadership when I arrived in 1982. The process was hardly painless, and I learned much about the very real, concrete challenges of inculturation and cross-cultural encounters. When I was sent to the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome in 1986 for my doctorate in moral theology (both the locus and subject matter were chosen by my Korean superiors), I decided that the best training I could obtain for teaching moral theology back in Korea would be to immerse myself in the sacred claim enjoyed by the ancient ethical tradition of Korea, Confucianism, and see if I could bring that into direct interaction with the sacred claim of a scriptural approach to Roman Catholic moral theology. In this project I worked intentionally at trying first to read for understanding the other culture's sacred text on its own terms, as far as possible, especially by paying attention to the ways in which the sacred text enjoys what I call a "sacred claim" on those who hold the text as "holy" (rather than trying to identify immediately how this text could be translated or trying to identify close parallels found in terms of Western philosophy or theology). My chosen texts came from the Confucian canon, especially the *Analects* and the *Doctrine of the Mean*, but in different parts of the world the sacred texts themselves would differ as well.¹

My combined experiences of living for a decade in Asia and Europe confirmed for me the paradigm shift that Karl Rahner had articulated in what might be called his last major article on Vatican II. Rahner spoke of the watershed the

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1. For example, I have just had a student present a paper on reconciliation in his home country of Mozambique drawing heavily upon the African *Ubuntu* philosophy of the human person, which has been articulated by Bishop Desmond Tutu in his *No Future Without Forgiveness* (London: Doubleday, 1998).

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Council represented in marking the beginning of the Church as a truly world church, and the challenge this presented for the integration of non-Western cultures: "[E]ither the Church sees and recognizes these essential differences of other cultures for which she should become a world Church and with a Pauline boldness draws the necessary consequences from this recognition, or she remains a Western Church and so in the final analysis betrays the meaning of Vatican II."² If Rahner's theological analysis of Church history is on target, then one ramification for moral theology in the new millennium will be that we must not only pay greater attention to how ethics is approached in various parts of the world, but also to change how we view the nature and task of Roman Catholic moral theology itself, taking into greater account places like Asia, Africa, Micronesia—in short in every geographical and cultural area that has not traditionally been seen as the center of our theological tradition.

This will involve more than a simple paradigm, yet we do not have to begin *ab ovo*. Moral theology in the twenty-first century should work out of foundational developments in the last half of the twentieth century. Vatican II, in at least three key documents, set the scene for this revisioning of the task and scope of moral theology: *Lumen Gentium*, *Gaudium et Spes*, and *Dignitatis Humanae*. *Lumen Gentium* represents a paradigm shift in the understanding of the nature of the Church itself, expressed as the People of God. This People of God lives in, and not ideally apart from, the modern world. *Gaudium et Spes* articulates a more engaging and positive interaction with this modern world. Finally, *Dignitatis Humanae* reverses the long-standing affirmation that "error has no rights" by formulating a new doctrine that brings together freedom and sanctity of conscience with an individual's choice to follow his or her conscience in one of the most important arenas of human life, namely the choice of religion. Sociologist of religion José Casanova expresses the importance of *Dignitatis Humanae* for the Church's role in public religion in these terms:

From a world-historical perspective, the Declaration on Religious Freedom, *Dignitatis Humanae*, is perhaps the most consequential and the most radical departure from tradition. It establishes the very conditions of possibility for a *modern* type of Catholic public religion.... The recognition of the inalienable right of every individual to freedom of conscience, based on the sacred dignity of the human person, means that the church abandons its compulsory character and becomes a 'free

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2. Karl Rahner, "Towards a Fundamental Theological Interpretation of Vatican II," *Theological Studies* 40 (1979): 724. The text is also found under the title "The Abiding Significance of the Second Vatican Council," *Theological Investigations*, vol. 20 (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1981): 90-102; and in *Vatican II: The Unfinished Agenda, A Look to the Future*, ed. Lucien Richard, with Daniel Harrington and John W. O'Malley (New York: Paulist Press, 1987): 9-32.

church'. Truth can no longer be imposed, nor is it permissible to coerce individual consciences to follow external dictates.

Certainly since John XXIII's first social encyclicals—*Pacem in Terris* and *Mater et Magistra*—up through the pontificate of John Paul II, the Church has sought to reach out to the modern world in this more open manner. The many apostolic travels of John Paul II have had the effect of putting a visible, human face on the Church's moral message, especially effective in its social teachings. Truth, as the gospel and the best of the Catholic tradition have long affirmed, does aim to set us free, and coming to a fuller realization of the splendor of that truth calls for a new Pentecost for the discipline of moral theology, one that will take seriously the task of inculturation of ethics.

Pentecost and Moral Theology

As a clue to what this ethical Pentecost might involve, let us recall the events of the birth of the Church. On that Pentecost, the first concrete manifestation of the gift of the Spirit was that the disciples "began to speak in other languages [γλώσσαις], as the Spirit gave them ability."⁴ In other words, the presence and gift of the Spirit enabled the disciples first to find their own voice to respond to Jesus' moral mandate to teach all that he had taught them. Of course, what they proclaimed would be the gospel message as they had come to internalize it through their intimate association with Jesus, but the key movement of the Pentecost event was that now it would be the disciples speaking on their own. This methodological finding of one's theological voice leads then to the next step, namely speaking effectively in that voice. Well before Lawrence Kohlberg's work on moral pedagogy, the Church realized that to speak convincingly one must first locate one's audience, and then address them in a language that is comprehensible to them.⁵ On the first Pentecost the disciples turned to the "devout Jews from every nation under heaven" (Acts 2:5) and spoke to them in a revolutionary way, that is "in the native language [δialeκτώ] of each" (Acts 2:6). Speaking in these "dialects" should *not* be seen as an early Palestinian feat of simultaneous translation in which the initial proclamation of the gospel message was somehow reproduced exactly and identically into mother tongues of the audience.⁶ One of

3. José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 72.

4. Acts 2:4b. All biblical quotations are taken from the NRSV.

5. For a discussion of the necessity of "comprehensibility" in developing moral discourse, see James T. Bretzke, S.J., "Life Matters: 6 'C's' of Moral Discourse," *New Theology Review* 15 (May 2002): 48-59.

6. The Greek text itself lends support to this interpretation. Note that from the Apostles' point of view they are speaking in other "languages" (γλώσσαις), but from their hearers' perspective these other "languages" (γλώσσαις) objectively-speaking are transformed subjectively-speaking into the "native language" (δialeκτώ) of each listener. The shift is theologically clearly more significant than a mere semantic choice of vocabulary.

the key insights of inculturation is that if the gospel kerygma is to be preached effectively in different cultural settings, it will have to interact differently with each cultural milieu. Therefore, the moral message of the gospel proclaimed in a variety of locations will necessarily "sound" different to different audiences. Thus an effective gospel-based moral theology will require using a language, that is, a native dialect, that is genuinely comprehensible by those who are being addressed. The Holy Spirit has been present in all cultures since the dawn of time, and so it is incumbent not just upon evangelists but also moral theologians to discern these ways in which the Spirit has manifested itself in any given culture. Discerning the presence of the Spirit means we must find and then "decode" those ways in which God has operated and continues to operate in and through a given culture.

This successful finding of one's voice for those who have not traditionally been "heard" is the first hallmark of the development of a Pentecost-based, inculturated moral theology; that is, we have to attend to and seriously consider how others are speaking. Thus, developing an inculturated moral theology is at least a two-way street, if not a more complicated intersection such as a traffic rotary: We need to bring theological voices from around the world into a safe, secure, and orderly intersection. It will not be sufficient for inculturation to be essentially a one-way street in which those non-Western cultures are encouraged to look into their own traditions to try and discover an authentic approach for doing a moral theology that speaks to this or that culture. We must bring this conversation into dialogue with similar efforts in other places around the world, including North America, Europe, and the Vatican.⁸ In short, I am arguing that a key task for moral theology in this century is to develop a methodology and practice of an inculturated and cross-cultural ethics.

Inculturation and Cross-Cultural Ethics

Let us take each of these concepts in turn. Although much of the vocabulary connected with inculturation was not coined until the last half of the twentieth century, Christianity has struggled from its earliest days with the moral

7. Cf. Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntius* (On Evangelization in the Modern World, 1975), especially no. 20 and no. 63; Catholic Church, Vatican Council II, *Ad Gentes* (On the Church's Missionary Activity, 1965), especially no. 22; Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes* (The Church in the Modern World, 1965), especially ch. 2; and Vatican Council II, *Optatam Totius* (On Priestly Formation, 1965), no. 16.
8. Of course some important work in this regard has already been undertaken. I would call attention to the series of geographic "Notes on Moral Theology" published in the last several years in *Theological Studies*. See, for example, James T. Bretzke, S.J., "Moral Theology Out of East Asia," *Theological Studies* 61 (March 2000): 106-21; William O'Neill, S.J., "African Moral Theology," *Theological Studies* 62 (March 2001): 122-39; James F. Keenan, S.J., and Thomas R. Kopfensteiner, "Moral Theology Out of Western Europe," *Theological Studies* 59 (1998): 107-35. See also Thomas L. Schubeck, S.J., "Ethics and Liberation Theology," *Theological Studies* 56 (1995): 107-22.

ramifications arising from cross-cultural conflict.⁹ In our own time, despite some misgivings and miscues, inculturation clearly has established itself as a primary theological concern.¹⁰ While much has been done in the name of inculturation in liturgy, art and music, and 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.

Inculturation, however, if it is to be truly multidirectional and dialogical, must be formed and informed by, as well as form and inform, other moral theological reflections. This process involves what I term "cross-fertilization," and it is supported by the approach of 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, which seem to involve many if not all contemporary cultures. 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. These approaches and projects have raised a number of significant questions regarding its methodology, implicit conceptions of culture, as well as the nettlesome issue of attempting to compare different cultural ethics from a standpoint that itself is never a-cultural and therefore can never claim to be completely neutral.¹¹ A number of

9. 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 moral conflict.
10. 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. See also the set of monographs edited by Arij A. Roest Crolius, S.J., *Inculturation: Working Papers on Living Faith and Cultures*, 14 vols. (Rome: Centre "Cultures and Religions," Pontifical Gregorian University, 1982-1993).
11. 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). 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): 155-64. See also

recent studies utilize various hermeneutical and communicative theories to sketch out viable paradigms for developing a fundamental ethics as a whole, as well as its various components such as practical moral reasoning¹²; yet the accent of most of these studies falls on the *universality* of ethical discourse and its impact on normativity, values, and so on. Surprisingly scant attention seems to have been given to the *particularity* of the individual culture, which is found necessarily at the very core of each ethos and ethical system. We might wonder, therefore: How could we hope to realize either the project of an authentic globalization of ethics, or pay the proper attention to the individuality of the particular situation of a local Christian community, without taking better stock of this essential aspect of cultural particularity?

On the other hand, cross-cultural ethics stresses 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 that take place in all of the parties involved in these interactions).¹³

Comparative ethics in the second version, 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 moral say, without being prejudiced or forced into a conceptual framework of another culture's ethical tradition. This in turn may obscure and/or distort the insights that the first culture has to offer in deepening our shared understanding of not just the gospel and its ethical ramifications, but the whole natural law tradition as well. These cultural frameworks contain many of what Karl Rahner terms "global pre-scientific convictions," which often tend to be "smuggled in (*bineingechnuggelt*)" to the discussion in such a way that the selection and use of data is done in a way that skews the information utilized, and in turn leads to incomplete and/or imperfect ethical conclusions.¹⁴ To put Rahner into simpler language, it often is not so much a question of *what* people believe, but *how* they believe.

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.

12. See Gene Outka and John P. Reeder, ed., *Prospects for a Common Morality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

13. 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," *Pacific* 9 (1996): 69-86.

14. Karl Rahner, "On Bad Arguments in Moral Theology," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 18 (New York: Crossroad, 1984), 74.

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 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."¹⁵

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 whole world-view, mores, customs, and such and seeks to impose it on other cultures. Since those who find themselves navigating these troubled waters are often accused of drifting toward either one or the other of these hazards, let me underscore that my proposal for cross-cultural ethics is founded on the grounding assertion of the natural law tradition, namely acknowledgment of the existence of an objective and universal moral order. Thus, I am *not* arguing for a position of ethical relativism, in which moral truths, goodness, norms, and so forth change from right to wrong or good to bad depending solely on cultural factors. Rather, I hold that 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. This classic natural law approach, however, tends to overlook or minimize the foundational aspect of the essential particularity of any and every culture; 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 that we now realize more clearly were actually cultural mores tied to a particular time and place. It is the methodology itself of cross-cultural ethics that becomes the map for intercultural communication and collaboration.

The methodological presupposition of cross-cultural ethics might also be expressed with a computer metaphor of "interfacing," which is the process and

15. 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.

the ability of one computer program to access and work with another program. In cross-cultural ethics, the aim of interfacing 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, and stories, as well as what are held as moral norms and the natural law. It is my contention that most, if not all, cultures cast moral norms and ethical arguments in terms of a "thin" rather than "thick" description, to build on anthropologist Clifford Geertz's well-known terminology, but that the process by which most arrive at the cogency of the logic of these thin description arguments is more, and more often, through an inductive rather than a formal deductive process.¹⁶ The tradition of casuistry, as 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. "Thin" does *not* mean "bad" while "thick" means "good"; rather, it refers primarily to the process of what features are considered morally relevant and how. I would argue merely that the inductive process is formed and informed by the wide range of factors that are better grasped in terms of a thick description. Thus, a cross-cultural ethical methodology, which allows for interface with both the thick and 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 will learn and change.

As an example of cross-fertilization of our moral languages, consider the moral concept of virtue.¹⁷ For St. Thomas, virtue tends to be seen more functionally, and thus he refers to the virtues in terms such as "habits." The verbs associated with these virtues are likewise expressed functionally; hence, we tend to find terms such as "exercise" and "acquire" used frequently in this regard. Possession and/or technical proficiency are the ways in which virtues relate to humans in the Thomistic scheme, while the basic unit of moral agency in Thomistic (and Western!) ethics has always been the individual, *l'homme tout seul*.

16. Thick and thin are concepts that, 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): 336-55.
17. A number of good works have come out on this theme in recent years. See, for example, Alasdair MacIntyre, "Incommensurability, Truth, and the Conversation Between Confucians and Aristotelians about the Virtues," in *Culture and Modernity: East-West Perspectives*, ed. Eliot Deutsch (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991): 104-23; Lee H. Yearley, *Mencius and Aquinas: Theories of Virtue and Conceptions of Courage*, SUNY Ser., Toward a Comparative Philosophy of Religions, (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990), as well as several articles that discuss aspects of Yearley's book that were published in the *Journal of Religious Ethics* 21 (1993): 343-95.

In traditional Confucian ethics, however, by counter-example, the basic unit of moral agency is never the individual *tout seul*. Rather, the individual is understood *always and only* in terms of a matrix of relationships. Thus, the moral agent is conceived as someone's son, father, elder brother, younger sibling, friend, and so forth. Virtue, too, is conceived relationally, and it would probably be more accurate to speak of the virtues themselves in more ontological terms.¹⁸ Consequently, Confucius speaks of moral "sagehood" and the ideal of the *Ch'ün-tzu* (which is difficult to translate, but which might be rendered as the "Superior Person" or even "Paradigmatic Individual").¹⁹ Contrasted to this moral ideal would be the *Siao-jen* (the "mean" person, in the sense of being "small-hearted" or egoistic).

Verbs associated with concepts of virtue in Confucian ethics often have a more aesthetic nuance to them. Consequently, one finds terms taken from gemology, such as "cut and polish," "grind and hone," "cultivate," and so on used throughout the books of the Confucian Canon.²⁰ Possession of and technical proficiency in the virtues are not inconceivable in the Confucian scheme, but the artistic nuance of the language of a gem-cutter suggests more accurately that moral "virtuosity" is the truest goal of the person who strives to be truly and fully human. The Confucian language of moral virtuosity and artistry would resonate well with much of the biblical Wisdom literature, and thus the cross-fertilization of these two canons could help furnish us, along with the inclusion of Thomas' systematic insights, with what true human virtue actually embraces.

Conclusion

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 virtue, duty, the common good, the natural law, and so forth 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

18. For a fuller discussion of this point, see my article, "The Tao of Confucian Virtue Ethics," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 35 (1995): 25-41. Through an investigation of Confucian ethics, I raise issues, such as the communal grounding of virtue ethics, which might help to clarify and/or expose some of the philosophical difficulties in the current Western debate on ethics of virtue vs. ethics of duty.

19. For one of the best contemporary interpreters of the Confucian notion of the Superior Person (*Ch'ün-tzu*), as well as possible applications in Western ethics, see Antonio S. Cua's *Dimensions of Moral Creativity: Paradigms, Principles, and Ideals* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1978).

20. For one instance of this usage, see the exchange between Confucius and one of his prize disciples, Tsze-kung, as recorded in *The Analects* (1:15) (James Legge, *Confucian Analects, The Great Learning and the Doctrine of The Mean* [New York: Dover Publications, 1971] [Chinese text; translation with exegetical notes and dictionary of all characters; republication of the second revised edition, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1893, as vol. 1 in *The Chinese Classics Series*].)

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 alongside 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, a fuller understanding of the richness and complexity of the moral world would develop both within individual cultures as well as across cultures.²¹

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. We do need, however, 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.

Finally, by way of summary 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 equals 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 Schreier terms "intercultural hermeneutics." This will involve a combination

21. 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). For an example of how cross-fertilization might inform our moral theological tradition, 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, vol. 41, ed. James Donahue and Theresa Moser (Mystic CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1996), 83-105.

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 *mis*judgment. Acceptance of this criterion of cultural reciprocity leads in turn to a third condition, a radical openness to accept a newer 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.²² A naïve reading of these traditions or a simplistic acceptance or rejection of such sacred texts will only impede a genuine inculturation of Christian ethics. At the same time, however, we must also affirm that the key sacred text for all Christians is the Bible. Any Christian ethics that is not biblically nourished runs the grave risk of remaining tied to one particular time and place, and moreover, will find it impossible to dialogue with people of other cultures involved in evangelization, the process of hearing and responding to the Good News preached to all men and women, in all times and in all cultures.

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 that merits greater attention in the future. ■

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