

MORAL THEOLOGY AND THE WORLD CHURCH

One of the limitations which any individual who wishes to understand the "world Church" will confront is the fact of his or her own determinate cultural background. Few if any are truly citizens of "the world," and North Americans seem particularly unlikely to have been exposed in depth to other cultural experiences. Because to an extent my own credentials as a moral theologian exemplify the insularity of Western Christianity, I am also an example of the beginning point which many will share as they attempt to listen to the experience of persons whose cultural milieu, and therefore social and individual identity, is vastly unfamiliar. My own attempt has involved delving into the pages of journals such as *African Ecclesiastical Review* and *Indian Theological Studies*, as well as many back issues of *Concilium*. In the process, I have discovered that it is precisely particular voices in the world Church, with their concreteness, conviction, and humanity, which are the ingredient necessary for a more clear understanding of what it is that moral theology is about in a "world" Christianity. These voices teach that the gospel is heard only as it is incarnated in specific cultural settings, and that no one of those settings can claim the finality and supremacy that belong to the Lord and his Spirit alone.

The emerging identity of Christianity as self-consciously a "world Church" (rather than a "Western," a "Eurocentric," or even a "Roman" one) offers a new understanding of and potential for the *self-critical function* of Christian ethics to which St. Paul seems to exhort us in 1 Thessalonians: "test everyting; hold fast what is good, abstain from every form of evil" (5:21-22). My central thesis is that diversity of cultures and moralities within Christianity will provide for a *process of evaluation* consisting in the mutual confrontation, enrichment, and even friction of the various "inculturations" of the people of God. It is only in the dialectic, the interplay, and the "testing" of moralities within and among faithful Christian communities that the adequacy of the lived faith to the gospel can be determined. That process will transpire within a renewed and enlarged context, thanks to the developing character of Christianity as a pluriform yet universal religion. On the negative side, this means that it is possible neither to select one culturally distinct system of Christian ethics which is normative in relation to others, nor to lift out some essential "core" of Christian morality from its various cultural embodiments, in order to employ it as an abstract criterion over against all particular manifestations. The most we may achieve is appreciation of broad gospel *ideals*, such as "love" or "inclusive human dignity;" and central biblical *symbols*, such as kingdom, cross, and resurrection which then become the focal points for specific elaboration in the contexts of many cultures.

Further more or less theoretical discourse on the nature of moral theology in the world Church runs the risk of the sort of unhelpful abstraction which I have just asserted it to be a function of the world Church to check. Therefore, despite my limitations in carrying out the program, I will devote the central portion of my remarks to a consideration of three particular moral dilemmas in the three distinct cultures of Africa, India, and China. This is not to say that our present Eurocentric Catholicism is not seriously in need of dialogue with cultures closer to home, in the Americas, for instance. However, the issue of the indigenous expression of Christianity in cultures which are at present still dominated by other religions offers a particularly interesting point of entry for the consideration of what it means to act in a distinctively "Christian" way at all, for it is in these cultures that the Christian problematic is being worked out in a fresh way.

The three moral problems are: the customary practice of progressive and often polygamous marriage in Africa; the social interdependence and social inequity represented by the caste system in India; and the coercive resort to abortion as a desperate means of population control in China. My aim obviously cannot be to resolve these problems completely, but rather to achieve mutual conversation between Western Christian perspectives on the moral life and the perspectives engendered within the cultures of Africa, India, and China. Of course, the depth of any dialogue depends on the degree to which each partner knows and respects the particular identity, uniqueness and idiosyncrasy of the other. We hope that what begins as "polite conversation" ends with genuine communication.

As a preliminary, let me note that I think there will be three major avenues of exchange opened by the examples I have mentioned (and perhaps by the context of "world Church" generally). The first is refinement of Christian understandings of the individual moral agent and the community within which his or her agency is defined. Among all the cultures of the world, Western anthropology and ethics seem preeminently concerned with the dignity, freedom and inviolability of the individual. Almost without exception, non-Western cultures are anti-individualist. Perhaps partly as a result, they not only do not focus on individual rights, but also have relatively lesser concern for the morality of particular acts and norms specifying them. Second, Western philosophy and ethics are committed to the methods of logical analysis. There is a manifest interest in a rational, deductive, and "scientific" approach to morals; and for a juridical framework determining the relation of the moral lives of persons to that of the community. Thus, the second avenue of exchange will be that along which we carry our convictions about what constitutes a good moral argument, about how moral evaluation ought to proceed. The third avenue is use of the Scriptures in ethics, and it is integrally related to the first two. To bring moral theology back to the Bible is to ask what views of person and community, or moral discernment, and of unity and pluralism are to be found there. Since, as I have said, my knowledge of most other cultures is second-hand and superficial, my remarks are meant

to be programmatic and provocative rather than comprehensive and conclusive. May others challenge what I will say, push it in further directions, or engage us in conversation with still more cultures, religions, and moral realities.

MARRIAGE IN AFRICA

At the 1980 Synod of Bishops on the Christian family, some forty African bishops intervened to represent the particular flavor of Christian commitment in the context of marriage practices indigenous to their homelands. While supportive of the Synod's eventual expression of the sacramentality of the marriage bond, the dignity of women, and the importance of conjugal intimacy, they indicated the need of African Christians to align these values with the more traditional realities of extended family, progressive marriage, polygamy, levirate marriage, and even divorce. The modern Western models of affectively committed bride and groom, nuclear family, and contractually understood marital consent and consummation, do not speak to the African experience, even when that experience is also one of Christianity. As was stated by Laurean Rugambwa, the Cardinal Archbishop of Dar-es-Salaam, evangelisation "is not implanting a foreign church of the western type in non-western cultures, but is the purifying and perfecting of every culture (*Guadium et spes*, 58; *Evangelii nuntiandi*, 20)."¹

Undoubtedly the most distinctive quality of African marriage is its embeddedness in the life of the family or clan. Matrimonial consent binds not only the couple but the families, and particularly the spouses to one another's families. In fact, in Africa, the expression "one flesh" has been used traditionally to denote kinship, either by blood or by marriage. The facts both that marriage is a social alliance, and that human life and human relationships are progressive, are captured in the African practice of "customary marriage." Although African culture itself is extremely diverse, there are certain elements common to different local forms of marriage custom. According to Georgette Odi Assamoi, an African Christian woman who holds a doctorate from the University of Montpellier, France, the prescribed stages by which two families arrange a marriage are the following:² 1) *Choosing the spouse*. Normally the man's family selects the wife, although the involvement of the young man and also the woman is becoming more common with Westernization and urbanization. 2) *Preliminary notification of their choice*. A delegation from the family of the man approaches that of the woman to announce its intention. The actual demand is made on a second visit, and on a third, gifts are offered in token of agreement between the families. 3) *The period of probation*. The relationship between the future spouses and their respective in-laws is solidified, as each does small tasks for the family of

¹ Quoted in *African Ecclesiastical Review* 23 (1981), 28.

² Georgette Odi Assamoi, "The Family in African Tradition," in *Christian Ethics: Uniformity, Universality, Pluralism*, ed. Jacques Pohier and Dietmar Mieth (*Concilium* 150; New York: Seabury, 1981), pp. 36-39.

the other. The budding relationship is given broad support and encouragement, for all in the village know that the two are promised. As Assamoi puts it, "Gradually everyone comes to consider the couple as man and wife, though the girl is still living in her own home. This probationary period may last for years, and see children born."³ 4) *The wife moves into her husband's home*, at least in the past accompanied by great ceremony and a week-long feast at the expense of the husband's family. 5) *Their life together*, in which the wife lives among her husband's family but still remains a member of her own, whether that membership is determined matrilineally or patrilineally. At any time during the process, the negotiations may be broken off, even if children have arrived, but more particularly if they have not. Even after five to eight years of cohabitation, a man may, at least in some areas of Africa, send an infertile woman back to her parents.

Also, after a period of years, the man may take a second wife. The most common reasons for so doing would be childlessness or the widowhood of a relative's wife (levirate marriage). However, the husband is *free* to marry another to increase his number of children; to improve the economic productivity of his wives, who also serve as field workers; or because he finds another woman attractive for other reasons. The distinction between sending back a woman before the solidification of a marriage, and divorcing her after it, is not made with precision, since the alliance of marriage in Africa is consolidated gradually, with no precise juridically convenient moment of termination. To specify a definite moment at which marital consent is "complete," a moment from which, but not before which, the union is valid and indissoluble, is foreign to the African view. Although divorce is recognized and permitted, it is infrequent, since families have a great stake in reconciling the couple. One reason is that marital break-down entails shame for both families. However, another reason has been that it is common in many regions of Africa for the young man to contribute a gift of considerable value, such as cows or goats, called the "bridewealth," to his parents-in-law on the occasion of the marriage. If a divorce occurs the bridewealth must be returned to the ex-husband. The value of the custom is that it forces the respective parents to reflect seriously on the prospects of a successful marriage for a couple, to support them in the establishment of a stable household, and to assist them in overcoming difficulty. One danger, as posed by the Bishop of Rutare, Ruanda, is that parents with mercenary motives can arrange for the marriage of their daughters to the offerer of the most sizeable bridewealth, thereby violating both her personal dignity and her freedom in accepting a partner. Perhaps worse, the bridewealth may introduce into the conjugal relation a feeling of "ownership" on the part of the husband, encouraging him to view his wife as a servant rather than an equal.⁴

³ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁴ Jean-Baptiste Gahamanyi, Synod intervention, cited in *African Ecclesiastical Review* 23, 1&2 (1981), 104-5.

The more we can perceive the details and the social ramifications of marriage in the African context, the more appreciative we become of its appropriateness for the embodiment of Christian ideals such as harmony of relationship, communal solidarity, hospitality and reconciliation. In particular, marriage in phases recognizes that life is a process or continuum. These are certainly the values downplayed by the autonomous individualism, the nuclear family structure, the romanticization of sexual and marital love, and the glorification of sexual relations that are so prevalent in Western societies and even in Western Christianity. From African society we receive a renewed meaning of marriage, reconceptualized in terms of its social basis. On such a basis the value of bearing and nurturing children, and even of striving for equanimity of relation with one's elders and with one's in-laws, takes on an importance not self-evident if one's point of departure is the enhancement of one's personal development or of that of the exclusive spousal relationship.

On the other hand, in its very emphasis on the dignity of the individual, the Christianity of the West does have something to say to the cultures of Africa. The value of such a mutual dialectic seems to be quite readily affirmed by the bishops and pastoral leaders of the Third World. In the African marriage situation, the point at which the question of dignity is most acutely raised is in defining the role of wife. While the progressive marriage respects the continuity of familial life, marriage in its traditional forms also makes the dignity of the woman contingent on her relations to her husband, particularly maternity. Insofar as motherhood is understood as a duty to the father, who retains all legal right to children even if the marriage ceases by his initiative, questions must be raised about the dignity and purpose of offspring as well. Again, the practice of polygamy has obvious value in providing social security for widows, and in ensuring the health and continuance of the family.⁵ Many Africans have spoken warmly in support of the familial harmony and cooperation that can exist in a polygamous marriage, in which each wife is said to enjoy a "one flesh" relation with her husband. Sometimes appeal is made to the example of the patriarchs of the Old Testament. In a society in which the status and economic welfare of women are all but completely dependent on marriage, there is much to be said in favor of a system which allows the admission of virtually all women into that state. Still, Georgette Odi Assamoi observes poignantly that those who make such defenses have rarely consulted the African woman, espousing instead the marital and social value of polygamy from the male point of view.

Has anyone tried to imagine what goes on in the heart and mind of a wife in a polygamous marriage when her husband is legally in the arms of another woman, her co-wife? Or to imagine the feelings of a woman who has spent her youth with a man who, though he is her own age, is now, quite lawfully, sleeping with girls young enough to be their own daughters, while she, her youth spent, and in all the anguish of the approaching menopause, has to sleep alone, with no-one to share her fears of the dark?⁶

⁵ See G. K. Falusi, "African Levirate and Christianity," *African Ecclesiastical Review* 24,5 (1982), 300-30.

⁶ Assamoi, p. 41.

Due to sensitivity to such questions and to the biblical preference for monogamy, most African Christians do not advocate polygamy as an ideal state. Monogamy generally is taken to be more compatible with the fullness of the Christian understanding of marriage as an effective sign of Christ's presence, and as a covenant "by which a man and a woman establish between themselves a partnership of the whole of life," ordered not only to "the procreation and education of offspring," but also to "the good of the spouses."⁷ The fact is, however, that African Christianity occurs in a culture which is already *de facto* polygamous.

A key and recurrent dilemma of moral theology is thus presented to us by the African situation. It is the necessity of applying principles to concrete situations in which not all factors may be apt for their ideal realization. Flexibility in determining what is objectively just, and therefore to be supported pastorally, is essential if Christianity is truly to meet diverse cultural experience. At present, it is a general practice in Africa to demand that a polygamist who converts to Christianity set aside all but one of his marriages (as canonically "invalid"), or, if he declines to do so, to refuse him participation in the sacraments. What are the implications of this policy from the standpoint of Christian ethics? The norm of monogamy is taken seriously and upheld, but perhaps in a way insufficiently sensitive to the cultural realities in which this respect is manifested. Does the policy simply ratify the social expectation that a wife's destiny is more or less at the disposal of her husband, in this case his decision to convert? If she does not make a similar decision she is unilaterally deprived of her role as wife and not infrequently of her children also. As African Christians have suggested, better pastoral assistance is needed for Christians who have lived polygamously, so that both specifically Christian views of marriage *and* justice to all concerned can be upheld.⁸ Obviously, I cannot here outline a "solution" to the problem of polygamy among African Christians. (For one thing, I am not an African Christian.) However, the Bishop of Kabale, Uganda, Barnabas Halem'Imana, offers an insight which is in its essence programmatic for our analysis of other cultures and other moral problems: "In our time of rapid change, the pastors of the Church have to be more ready than ever to listen to the experiences of married people, so as to be able to read 'the signs of the times.' . . . Sincere dialogue is the best means of finding solutions to . . . many problems."⁹

In brief summary, then, what we realize from our African example is that gospel ideals such as marital fidelity and the dignity of all persons in the kingdom have an appeal which transcends cultural customs. We also discover, however, that the embodiment of those ideals may not be facilitated most effectively by a method resembling the derivation of a

⁷ 1983 *Code of Canon Law*, Can. 1055.

⁸ AMECEA Consultation on Family Life, *African Ecclesiastical Review* 24,5 (1982), 269.

⁹ *African Ecclesiastical Review* 23,1&2 (1981), 22.

conclusion from a premise in a logical syllogism. The look and the feel of lived response to the gospel in Africa may be unanticipated, and even jolting to a few of our Western moral sensibilities. I do not mean to assert a relativism of cultural values, but rather to say that the criterion of the objective validity of any interpretation of the moral demand of the gospel is the gospel itself, and the *life* it inspires; and the gospel is announced and received only within determinate cultures.

CASTE IN INDIA

Despite its richness of culture, which is at once ancient, varied, and profoundly spiritual, India is a nation still struggling for economic health and for full realization of the promise of the parliamentary democracy established with her independence from Great Britain after World War II. An Indian theologian describes the economic situation by remarking that, despite recent advances in technology and industry, India is still a poor country. "Roughly 50% of the population lives at a subhuman level of existence not having the basic means to be human, deprived of their human dignity and basic rights, and unable to function and grow as human beings."¹⁰

As most Westerners are generally aware, the framework of social and personal relations in India is the caste system. The four broad class or caste groups (priest or teacher, ruler or warrior, merchant or trader, and worker or peasant) are further divided into some 3,000 subcastes whose members must marry within their own group and associate with those outside according to strictly stipulated limitations. All caste groups are separated from the tens of millions of outcastes or "untouchables," who are often without the bare means of survival. Although legal reforms of the 1950's erased some inter-caste barriers, making it legally possible to marry and adopt children from other castes, the higher castes especially are still strongly defined by deeply entrenched boundaries.¹¹ Approximately 20% of the population controls agriculture in the rural areas and industry in urban areas. The poor majority are dependent on an elite toward which the Indian educational system, cultural tradition, and, ultimately, the whole socio-economic and political systems are directed.

The problem of injustice in India is, then, one of systemic, structural, and institutional injustice. The social system is interdependent and relatively unified, but by its very harmony, it perpetuates exploitation. An Indian Jesuit, M. Amaladoss, comments that the Church's social teaching, which in its Western "natural law" expression cuts *against* the abuses both of socialism and of capitalism by affirming the dignity of every person *within* a framework of "the common good," is neither promulgated

¹⁰ D. S. Amalorpavadass, "Evangelisation in the Context of India," *Indian Theological Studies* 17,2 (1980), 99-119.

¹¹ Phillips Talbot, *Understanding India* (New York: Foreign Policy Association, Inc. 1973), pp. 8-10.

effectively nor implemented.¹² The apparent implication is that the Christian message has not reached, or better, been born within, the Indian experience in a manner which facilitates and even demands structural change.

The "Indian experience" within which Christianity is seeking a realm of significance is a tightly woven fabric of culture and religion. Four out of five Indians are Hindus. Traditionally, Hinduism has been individualistic, having at its centre the liberation of the individual (man) through four prescribed stages of life in which resignation, detachment, and contemplation progressively are achieved. At another level, however, Hinduism is highly social, since the pattern of the individual life coheres with that of society, according to the concept of *dharma*. Dharma designates essentially the permanent laws which order the cosmos, including all nature and human activities, and which are available through reflection on nature and human custom.¹³

Among the possible explanations of the perseverance of the caste system (besides the moral notion of *karma*, or reincarnation according to the character of one's past life) is that the essence of dharma is a pattern of social interdependence. Observing the obligations of the position into which one is born promotes the stability and unity of society.¹⁴ Prominent among the obligations of the Hindu, indeed the one that comprehends all others, is his or her duty to family.

A joint family based on the community of blood, identity of interests, a spirit of sacrifice and of subordination of the young to the old, the offer of adequate protection and support to its weaker members such as widows, the aged and the infirm, and the unemployed was considered in the past to be one of the most beautiful, potent, and viable forces of the social life of Hindus. It was believed to be a school which prepares the individual for the larger community life.¹⁵

Modern humanitarian Hindu thinkers, such as Sri Aurobindo Ghose (1872-1950), Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), and Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) began to transform the Hindu views of *dharma* and of communal affiliation, and so the socio-economic status quo, by closing the gap between contemplation and action, and by extending loyalty across family and caste lines to include all members of Indian society.¹⁶ Traditional, religiously based moral virtues such as non-violence, truth, and non-possession have taken on meanings with more direct and significant social implications.¹⁷ Nonetheless, the longstanding family and

¹² M. Amaladoss, S.J., "The Indian Church in the Struggle for a New Society," *Indian Theological Studies* 18,4 (1981), 332-341.

¹³ R. De Smet, S.J., "Natural Law and the Dharma of Renascent Hinduism," *Indian Theological Studies* 18,2 (1981), 105-6.

¹⁴ K. David, "The Hindu View of Community: Classical and Modern," *Indian Journal of Theology* 28,3 (1979), 180-81.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 178. See also De Smet, *op. cit.*

¹⁷ Y. D. Tiwari, "Hindu Dharma in a Changing Society," *Indian Journal of Theology* 26, 3&4 (1977), 179-85.

class identity of most Indians is a reality with which Christian evangelization must deal. This opens up for Christian moral theology the question of the critical and dialectical function which must accompany any "inculturation" of the gospel. As we have seen from the African experience that moral theology must be truly *indigenous* so shall we see from the Indian one that it must be truly *universal*. It must be faithful to the central biblical symbols, and that fidelity must have a *critical edge*.

Let me exemplify the problem with an observation of fact about Christianity in India: it is a tiny minority position, endorsed almost exclusively by members of the lower castes, and "outcastes." Certainly, to these, Jesus' concern for the poor, the oppressed, the marginalized in society, and the "sinners" must come as a resounding revelation. But the explanation of the virtual non-existence of converts from the upper classes is also found in the New Testament in Jesus' exchange with the rich young man who inquires regarding the way of salvation (Mt 19:16-30). Actually, the consequences of conversion for the upper-caste Indian almost exceed the imagination of one used to the much more fluid and individualist American class system. From the Hindu point of view, the religious and cultural communities of membership cannot be dissociated. Baptism is a social event indicating severance of all ties with the traditional and mainstream culture. A Hindu's decision to reject privileged caste status would bring not only shame upon his or her family, but would practically incapacitate its members regarding many dealings in the social world of which they had previously been a part. Among the most serious results would be the inability of the convert to be successful in finding suitable marriage partners for his or her children, a necessary prerequisite to their participation in a society so strongly defined in terms of family identity.

At the same time, many have observed, neither Christianity nor its ideals of equality and social justice can make inroads in India unless persons of influence come to share them. Thus some Christian apologists have suggested that Christianity and Hinduism are not mutually exclusive, since the latter is represented largely by rules of diet, ritual purity, and social custom, rather than by theological doctrine. It is claimed that these rules are not dissimilar to the cultural practices and laws the first Jewish converts to Christianity were permitted to continue to observe.¹⁸ Even the great Jesuit missionary, Robert de Nobili, is reported to have said "The holy spiritual law which I proclaim obliges no man to renounce his caste or to do anything incompatible with his caste-honour. . ."¹⁹ Insofar as such views express a proper reluctance to impose Western culture on all who receive the gospel and embody Christian living, these sentiments are admirable enough. But is there underlying them a two-fold presupposition, namely that Christian conversion is a spirituality which does not have

¹⁸ Hans Staffner, S.J., *The Open Door, a Christian Approach to World Religions* (Bangalore: ATC, 1978); summarized in a reply by A. Pushparajan, "Sociological Aspects of Inculturation," *Indian Theological Studies* 18,3 (1981), 271-288.

¹⁹ Cited in Pushparajan, p. 278.

intrinsic implications for interpersonal relationships, and that cultures within which the gospel is proclaimed are not always subject to its *criticism*, a criticism which is made at least partly on the basis of other cultural realizations of biblical symbols such as kingdom and cross? Both Western and Indian incarnations of Christianity are provisional but neither is for that reason inauthentic. What do they have to say to one another?

The Indian experience challenges the Catholic Church to speak of individual dignity, rights, duties, and common good in a way which takes explicit account of the positive values framed in the Indian appreciation of family cohesiveness and an interdependence of society which must unavoidably be realized through the integration of varied economic, social, and also class functions. It challenges Christianity to speak of liberation from oppression in a manner cognizant of the fact that the hope for a "new society" or "new kingdom" has also motivated deeply religious Hindu thinkers. Of course, Western mediators of the gospel will offer the experience of Christianity in their own traditions, that the eschatological "kingdom" of the gospel always judges existing social structures. Further, the symbol "body of Christ" which runs as a theme through the Pauline epistles confronts all Christians with a radical egalitarianism (Gals 3:28), exemplified in the prohibition of social distinctions at the common meal (1 Cor 11:17-22).

In summary, India clearly presses at a more communitarian level the issue that appeared for the African polygamist first of all at the level of interpersonal relations: How are gospel symbols and Christian ideals to be incarnated in *practice*? And, at what point does an accommodation of Christian moral imperatives to the exigencies of a concrete life situation leave the realm of the objectively justified and enter that of the unjustifiable compromise? This is a perennial and difficult question. The discussion is reminiscent of that over whether the inclusion of the *haustafeln* in some Pauline and later Pastoral epistles represents an unwarranted and degenerative accommodation to the dominant culture, or an adaptation necessary to survival and by it justified.²⁰ Perhaps in the inclusion of the "household codes" in the Christian canon we may find some model not of substantive relations between members of community, but, in Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's term, a "historical prototype."²¹ In this case, we might discover a prototypical *process* by which cultural values can be accommodated or tolerated as the actual and hence *unavoidable* milieu of conversion, and in a manner permitting the final *supremacy* rather than submergence of the gospel values with which they stand in tension. For if the value of equal discipleship had *not*

²⁰ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), ch. 7.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 34. However, Schüssler Fiorenza does *not* think the incorporation of the *haustafeln* is a positive model in *any* sense, but rather a betrayal of the "discipleship of equals" which Jesus called into being.

survived its somewhat compromising "inculturation" in Greco-Roman society, we would not even be able to ask the now common *question* of the adequacy of the household codes as an expression of the gospel.

ABORTION IN CHINA

From our discussion of African and Indian morality, it has become quite evident that many non-Christian cultures view the relation of the individual to his or her familial, civic, and religious communities much differently than the way to which we have been accustomed in the twentieth-century West. Certainly it is not sufficient to say merely that these cultures are lacking in our more "advanced" view of the dignity of the person. The lack which they highlight in our own view is the integral connection of all interpersonal relations to the good or ill of the community without which they really would have no foundation and no meaning. This insight into sociality and interdependence parallels many symbols and themes in the Judaeo-Christian Scriptures. Often token recognition has been accorded to human sociality in Western cultures, while the basic formula of moral analysis remains individualistic and act-centered.

Another emerging insight, also recognized superficially but not fully integrated into Western moral theology, is that of the artificiality of the distinction between "personal" and "social" morality. Marriage, for instance, at first appears to be a moral relation of two individuals. In fact, we sometimes comprehend it under the even more individual- and act-oriented category, "sexual ethics." But we have been able to observe that the precise reason Western Christianity has been inadequate to speak to African customary marriage is that it interprets the gospel in regard to marriage in juridical terms, focusing on the "validity" of "consent" between "spouses." What is generally overlooked is that marriage is also an issue of *social* morality. Without social support, consent and validity cannot be realized; a breakdown in the partnership of the couple has social ramifications extending far beyond their division of mutual domestic property. The African would no doubt view the Western Catholic attempt to define marital breakdown in terms of an original nullity to be completely wrongheaded, for it presupposes that the processes by which life is constituted can be somehow complete at their point of genesis.

The second case, that of the Indian caste hierarchy, demonstrates a similar point: the problems of economic injustice and of systemic social inequities certainly do not exist apart from the concrete lives and decisions of individuals. The individual's pattern of life depends on and contributes to the social pattern. And, to come full circle to the role of individual in community, the gospel will be incarnated in India only when those who preach and accept it have a language in which to endorse the positive connection of a social structure based upon group cohesiveness and the interdependence of groups, to the preaching of salvation as common membership in God's "kingdom" and in the "body" of Christ.

These related insights into the sociality of the individual and the interconnection of personal and social ethics are underlined by attempts in the Peoples Republic of China to control population. President Reagan's recent visit to China was the occasion of extensive examination of its life by the U.S. media. *Time* and *Newsweek* both published cover stories on the agricultural, industrial, scientific and technological, and military modernization of China under Mao's successor Deng Xiaoping. A prime barrier to successful modernization is the demographic reality: China has a population of one billion, more than half of whom were born since 1949, and who are now reaching childbearing age. In order to meet its goal of limiting the population to 1.2 billion by the year 2000, the Chinese government has enacted a policy of one child per family.

The practical consequences of the policy were demonstrated graphically in the PBS documentary, "China's Only Child." Village family planning cadres promote and distribute contraceptives, encourage sterilization, observe as closely as possible the family planning practices of couples, train eagle eyes on signs of possible pregnancy. Upon discovering an unapproved one, they engage in daily exhortations to abortion, which are as persistent as they are nonnegotiable. Chinese couples are given strong incentives to avoid such situations. Those who pledge to have one child are granted monthly payments, and preference in education, employment, and housing. Those who have more than one are fined, receive reduced salaries, and are deprived of educational and health benefits. The infusion into the Chinese economy of some capitalist ideas and methods has, however, made it profitable, despite the disincentives, to have several children, especially among the peasants whose families farm the countryside.²²

Quite obviously, high-pressure abortion, especially late in pregnancy, presents a moral problem to the minds of Westerners. We tend to see it as at least a violation of the rights of the parents, especially of the woman. Many also view it as a violation of the value of the unborn life she carries, though we may differ on the precise status of that life, or on exactly what value it has in the various stages of pregnancy. The Catholic tradition represents a serious commitment to the protection of the fetus, even in its earliest development. In the disputes over abortion in Western religious, philosophical, and public policy settings there has been at least one common element. That is, we construe the abortion dilemma primarily as a matter of *rights*, usually the right of the fetus to life *versus* the right of the mother to life, to freedom of self-determination, to psychological health, to economic welfare, and so on. Even among those who do not deny a genuine conflict here, the discussion proceeds on the basis of a weighing of respective rights, and of the social contexts and policies necessary to support them effectively.

²² Melinda Beck with Larry Rohter and Carolyn Fiday, "An Unwanted Baby Boom," *Newsweek* (April 30, 1984), p. 47.

How does this approach to pregnancy and its termination relate to the Chinese experience? Is either a "pro-life" insistence on the inviolable personal dignity of the unborn child, or a "pro-choice" insistence on the right of the woman to control her own reproductive processes, likely to convince Chinese officials or family planning representatives that their abortion policy is ill-advised and even immoral? Will such arguments speak, for that matter, to the woman who has initiated an unapproved pregnancy which she does not wish to terminate? My implication of course is that they will not, for the Chinese reasons for and against childbearing are formulated in a mix of cultural traditions quite different from our own. Neither the reasons for nor against abortion are premised on the "rights" of any individuals. It would be more accurate to say that they are premised on "duties" and that, in fact, to the persons formulating them, the whole of the moral life is premised on duty and service to others, especially to one's primary community of affiliation. Those who aim to control population do so out of a strong identification of the good of the individual with that of society, of the "new China" in which equality and shared responsibility are to be realized. Those who seek to bear larger families do so also out of a sense of identification with community, but the primary locus of identity is the family. In Chinese tradition, ancestors are to be worshipped and their name is to be carried forth; the economic welfare of the present extended family is to be sought cooperatively by as many members as possible; one's own name and lineage are to be preserved, especially through sons. It is for this reason that the "one child" policy has spurred a resurgence of female infanticide.

How can we understand these differing moral perspectives within China itself? How can we enter them into conversation with a more typically Western worldview? Finally, does the gospel offer resources for bringing these perspectives into productive exchange, benefitting from rather than attempting to eradicate differences? According to the China-born scholar Julia Ching, the ethical teaching of Confucianism is "a form of altruism which gives consideration to special relationships of blood and duty." Its central virtue, "human-heartedness," signifies humanity's social nature and intrinsic compassion for others. It requires that parents, children, rulers, and friends be considered in a special way, but that one's relationship to all is determined by Confucius' equivalent of the "Golden Rule," i.e., that one not do unto others what one would not wish done to oneself.²³

Although Chinese Marxism is explicitly materialist and atheistic, and rejects the Confucian hierarchy of social loyalties, it has maintained some connection with China's cultural and philosophical legacy. The slogan "Serve the People," expressing commitment to a Chinese socialist society,²⁴ draws on the Confucian exhortation to altruism. According to a

²³ Julia Ching, "Ethical Encounter: Chinese and Christian," *Christian Ethics: Uniformity, Universality, Pluralism*, p. 32.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

sympathetic native of China, who has had opportunity to witness its daily life since the People's Revolution, there is in that country a changed consciousness, coming out of awareness of the "massive suffering" caused by the old social structures. This consciousness is one of solidarity. As he puts it,

The Chinese Revolution meant war against the Nationalist Army, struggles against big landlords and capitalists, rich peasants, supporters of imperialists, and others who opposed the revolution. It also meant a united front among industrial workers, richer or poorer peasants, intellectuals except those associated with the enemy, all laboring people, the destitute, and the left-wing of the national bourgeoisie.²⁵

The result has been an increased sense of structural evil and of mutual responsibility to effect change and provide security for all members of society. The ultimately discredited Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), as described by the same scholar, "represented a massive effort to embody the new methods."²⁶ It aimed to open the revolutionary "new humanity" to all members of society through service. Its eventual destructiveness resulted from loss of flexibility and a dogmatism captured in the dictum that forms of culture having no pragmatic relation to the improvement of society have no right to exist. Consequently, the Cultural Revolution had an effect of arbitrariness, fear, and enslavement rather than of liberation.

Chinese Christians developing a theological *understanding* of their national situation today sometimes see in its twentieth-century process of liberation an example of God's presence with the oppressed.²⁷ This is consistent with China's tradition of pragmatism and humanitarianism, and is consistent also with the Christian belief in incarnation and the manifestation of divine activity in history. Both the degeneration of the Cultural Revolution, and the biblical "kingdom of God," a symbol of eschatological hope, warn against the identification of the divine will with particular forms of human obedience to it, and against the rigidification and absolutization of a set of historical circumstances in which a manifestation of God is believed to have occurred. Chinese theologians have suggested that China, unlike some Third World nations, is now on the far side of its struggle for liberation from oppression. Thus the biblical themes most appropriate for its present situation are resurrection and especially reconciliation, which "also shows the characteristic of *yuan-rung* (the oneness and unity of things in the universe) of the Chinese culture."²⁸

If we return to the question of abortion, we can see in it a perfect example of the conflict of old and new moralities in China, and of attitudes toward group affiliation which have still to be reconciled.

²⁵ Hung Chih, "Chinese Daily Life as a Locus for Ethics," *China as a Challenge to the Church*, ed. Claude Geffre and Joseph Spae (*Concilium* 126; New York: Seabury, 1979), p. 35.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

²⁷ Sr. Maria Goretti Lau, S.P.B., and Fr. John Tong, "Some Theological Trends in the Chinese Church," *Indian Theological Studies* 19,4 (1982), 342.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 349.

Abortion is pushed forward as part of a solution to the problems of the national community, while giving birth is seen as an act of loyalty to the family. From a critical viewpoint based in the gospel, what the latter course lacks is the universality of orientation demanded not only in some ways by Mao but more radically by Jesus. Yet, whatever the merits of the official policy that individual lives and particular loyalties must be woven into the common welfare, the enactment of specific birth control programs which all but demand abortion falters toward the narrow dogmatism which brought down the Gang of Four. It is also hard to imagine that the characteristically Western emphasis on "personal dignity" in relation to both pregnant women and the unborn has nothing to say to the ideal of egalitarian respect and service endorsed by Maoism and by Chinese Christianity. What is clearly demanded is a more self-conscious pursuit of reconciliation, grounded in the receptive mutual understanding of dissimilar vantage points. But the eventual incarnation of a humane and Christian position on abortion in the Chinese environment undoubtedly will not take shape either in terms of what we think of as a "right to life" position protective of the unborn, nor a "right to choice" position protective of feminine self-determination. And it is simplistic to assert that if Chinese Christianity does *not* view the issue through either of these lenses, it has succumbed to a "totalitarianism" which subjugates the individual. The Chinese might well reply that it is typical of the Western eye to fail to see the delicate yet unseverable webs of relationship within which moral agency transpires, and of which moral duty commands recognition. A Chinese Christian perspective on abortion will no doubt include a service-oriented and communitarian development of Incarnation, cross, reconciliation, and kingdom; one which has profited from dialogue with Western "inculturations" of these symbols stressing equality of mutual participation in the community of Christ.

CONCLUDING AND PROGRAMMATIC REFLECTIONS

Both in the few conversations I have enjoyed with Christians of other cultural backgrounds, and in the cross-cultural literature with which I have become acquainted, there are some central themes which are striking. The first, which I reiterate, is that Christianity is not an "essence" which can be put "into" a culture. It is a concrete communal life which can only arise "out of" the *experience* of its members and of their already-existing communities. As J. Komonchak has commented, there is no such thing as a "universal" Christianity existing apart from the self-realization of particular churches. It is exactly this that is the condition of possibility of the self-criticism of the "universal" church.²⁹ An obvious consequence in the realm of moral theology is a certain decentralization of pastoral

²⁹ Joseph Komonchak, "Moral Pluralism and the Unity of the Church," in *Christian Ethics: Uniformity, Universality, Pluralism*, p. 93. See also Claude Geffre, "Theology in the Age of China: Evangelization and Culture," *China as Challenge to the Church*, pp. 75-87, for some general observations about the always original incarnation of Christianity in different cultures.

practice, and even of normative ethical reflection. Like ecclesiology, Christian ethics becomes genuinely universal out of the dialectic of its particular forms, not by the superimposition of one of them.

What may not be at first as obvious is that this appeal to experience has serious methodological consequences for normative Christian ethics. It does not, I think, represent merely an appeal to "subjectivity," as opposed to "objectivity." Instead, it leads to another approach to *objective* justification, one which differs methodologically in that it takes *concreteness* and *affectivity* seriously as sources of moral insight. The appeal is not dissimilar to Karl Rahner's "prediscursive faith instinct." It leads away from an exclusive reliance on the method of conceptual and logical analysis that typifies moral theology in the West. It was because of its over-emphasis on rational abstraction from the concrete that the "natural law" method became arid. It is now in a process of renewal precisely by those who emphasize historicity in natural law reasoning, and remind us that constructions of "essential human nature" must after all take concrete humanity as point of departure and as proving ground. If we can speak of American theology itself as a new part of the "world Church," then we will find an echoing theme in American Protestantism, e.g., in the ethics of Johathan Edwards, John Wesley, and H. Richard Niebuhr.

A second insight confirmed cross-culturally is the power of the Scriptures in speaking to the experience of *all* cultures, and of constantly engendering faith in the gospel. It is unfortunate that Catholic Western moral theology is only now beginning to transplant its own roots to the biblical literature. Newly Christianized cultures which may find canon law or the principle of double effect unintelligible and even ludicrous, still find the symbolism and narrative form of the biblical accounts compelling and enlightening of their situations. No doubt, as he claims, the Scriptures fulfill David Tracy's definition of "the classic." The perennial power of the classics of human thought derives from the fact that although they are produced by an intensification of particularity, they can *via* interpretation be received by the whole "public" of humanity, and are not confined to those within a particular tradition.³⁰

Thirdly, it has not gone unremarked by those reading the Scriptures with non-Western eyes that the canonical collection itself provides fruitful models of indigeneity and pluralism, since the Christian message has from its earliest days been preached and received through cultural prisms differently faceted.³¹ Joseph Hardy, Superior General of the Society of African Missions, speaks hopefully of the effect of indigenous theological and pastoral centers on the Church's episcopal leadership. He compares

³⁰ David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), chapter 3.

³¹ See R. Morgan, "The One Fellowship of Churches in the New Testament," in *Tensions between Churches of the First World and of the Third World*, ed. Virgil Elizondo and Norbert Greinacher (*Concilium* 144; New York: Seabury, 1981), pp. 27-33.

today's "Peter" favorably to the original, saying that our Pontiff is more ready to listen to Paul and Barnabas, and even to take up the pilgrim's staff and visit the new churches. "In this way, there is a full exercise of collegiality, and there is scarcely any danger of a new conflict of Antioch (Gal. 2)." Fr. Hardy does belie his own optimism somewhat when he continues,

It is a question of justice for the new peoples who are today entering the Church. The letter of the apostolic college gathered in Jerusalem is still relevant: "The Holy Spirit and ourselves have decided to impose on you no obligations except the indispensable ones" (Acts 15:28). I plead with this assembly to read again what seemed then indispensable for peace, for unity, and for mission, to understand the historical relativity of ecclesiastical law. In Africa or elsewhere, it would not be just to replace ancient prohibitions and taboos, the causes of much fear, by new ones that would be alien to the Word of God.³²

Christian community in the New Testament is a phenomenon of particular, local churches brought together spontaneously by a common interest, e.g., prayer and celebration of the eucharist. They are not juridically established units, but are based on a sense of fellowship. St. Paul's repeated exhortations to "build up" the community have reference to churches founded in diverse settings, and learning in a novel and immediate way the things necessary to embody Christ faithfully. Perhaps the most important contribution to Christianity of its new identity as a "world Church" will be the necessity to radically rethink the significance of conversion to the gospel, and to see the personal and communal relations entailed by conversion as a *novelty*. The world cultures can mediate Christian moral identity back again in a fresh way to Western Christianity, which has come to be encumbered by its Hellenistic, Roman, patristic, medieval, and even liberal-individualistic roots. These culturally specific worldviews have, at appropriate times in Christian history, been helpful in giving life to the vine of Christ, but some of them have ceased to provide nourishment sufficient for the freshness of new branches and the maturation of new fruit. Moral theology in the era of the world Church is challenged to accept and include new expressions of practical Christianity arising within the indigenous moralities of all the continents. These contribute to Christianity not only the uniqueness of particular identities, but also a universality of complementarity and of critical perspective. These new expressions are not foreign species grafted on to the parent vine, but are organic signs of life, of growth, and of cooperative adaptation.

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³² Intervention at 1980 Synod, cited in *African Ecclesiastical Review* 23, 1&2 (1981), p. 25.