

BEYOND TRENTO—INTEREST GROUP

Title:	Beyond Trento: North American Moral Theology in a Global Church
Conveners:	Bryan Massingale, Marquette University Kristin Heyer, Santa Clara University
Moderator:	Kristin Heyer, Santa Clara University
Presenters:	Anna Floerke Sheid, Duquesne University Bryan Massingale, Marquette University
Respondent:	Lúcas Chan, Trinity College Dublin

The “Beyond Trento” interest group was initiated in the wake of the 2010 international gathering of Catholic ethicists in Trento, Italy (“Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church”) to consider how understanding CTSA members’ work as taking place in a global church should transform the shape of North American theological discourse and ethical praxis. Its inaugural session featured two presentations by North American scholars considering how cross-cultural experiences shape their research and teaching, with a response from a non-US perspective. In her presentation, “Theological Research across Cultures,” Anna Floerke Sheid began by noting she approaches cross-cultural ethics from a position of culture-privilege, given the fact that her social location confers her comfort in a culture that is steadily homogenizing the world and the luxury to choose whether or not to dialogue with cultures other than her own. She discussed the challenges of magnifying marginalized cultures without engaging intellectual colonialism via the analogy of comparative theology, and proposed three primary reasons for pursuing such dialogue: furthering the catholicity of the Church; fruitfully reshaping the theologian’s perceptions; and revealing assumptions that impact interpretations of theo-ethical concepts. Drawing upon Congolese theologian Bénézet Bujo (based at Fribourg), she suggested that the church’s catholicity is compromised to the extent that it reifies methods that fail to resonate in (nonwestern) cultural contexts, such as natural law theory (and, conversely, fails to include cultural insights of entire continents). She indicated ways in which her own immersion in the South African context altered her lenses as a North American theological ethicist via examples of operative anthropologies and notions of forgiveness. She concluded by bidding others to pursue more robust cross-cultural engagement through similarly immersive practices not unlike those pursued by comparative theologians.

Bryan Massingale’s presentation, “The Challenge of Global Voices in Teaching Ethics,” considered the profound implications for Catholic theological ethics if the summons to incorporate voices from the global South is taken seriously in North America. He focused his remarks around a case study of using an essay of Bénézet Bujo on reasoning in African ethics in a master’s level Fundamental Moral Theology course. Bujo’s rich reflection on the constitutive nature of relationships for human personhood led to unforeseen yet provocative questions: whether the course was an exercise of intellectual hegemony if this was the only unit where such a voice was present; and how would taking this understanding of personhood seriously revamp the entire course, if not the discipline of moral theology itself? Massingale then highlighted the dangers of intellectual tokenism and “marginalization by inclusion” if

heretofore missing global voices are used in such a way that the basic structure of the “mainstream” discourse remains unchallenged and its normative assumptions are still considered (falsely) universal. He concluded that the true challenge of doing cross-cultural ethical reflection outside of a “northern paradigm,” as envisioned by the CTWEC project, is its summons to a kind of Copernican revolution in the discipline—one that will require from North American ethicists deep intellectual humility, personal conversion, and existential courage as they experience a decentering or de-privileging of their own voices and concerns.

Lúcas Chan responded to Anna and Bryan’s presentations in light of his own experiences as an Asian Catholic ethicist (from Hong Kong) trained in North America and teaching outside of his home continent. He cautioned that the reality of being born into an intellectual world that was already multi-culturally engaged means that engaging cross-cultural theology is not limited to the traditional east-west, north-south dichotomy. He compared the classical Confucianism’s anthropo-cosmic worldview to the African concept of relational personhood Bryan mentioned, which includes responsible relationships “both to those who have gone before and to those who will come after.” He then traced three epochs of doing theological ethics from his experiences: the first marked by an earlier generation of Asian theological ethicists who came to North America (or Europe) to learn about Western theology and philosophical frameworks, and to adopt a Western way of thinking, arguing, and expressing thoughts. The second epoch when non-Euro-American students were encouraged to identify, embrace, and bring their own cultural experiences into teaching and scholarship marked a step forward, but still risked “intellectual tokenism.” He warned that many dialogues and comparative studies remain hegemonic and therefore ill equipped to allow the missing voice to reshape the discipline. He noted the third epoch encourages theological ethicists from both hemispheres to acquire concrete experiences of other cultures and traditions. He concluded that such encounters broaden and deepen participants’ perspective and understanding of others as well as help verify or correct others’ views when necessary. In closing, Lúcas advocated CTEWC’s newly launched visiting professorship program as an organized platform for promoting active engagement of this third epoch on the global level. The robust discussion that followed among the sixty-one participants considered strategies for deepening cross-cultural engagement and its challenges to the discipline. The lively session ended with the launch of the second book in the CTEWC series, *Feminist Catholic Theological Ethics: Conversations in the World Church*.

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