

Presidential Address

FEMINIST ETHICS AND THE CHALLENGE OF CULTURES

INTRODUCTION

Feminist theology is thoroughly particular and historical: its beginning point is the *experience of women*. The increasing variety of feminist theologies emerging in North America and around the globe intensifies the particularity of feminist ethics (and of all ethics). Indeed, even the term "feminist" has its own particular point of origin the concerns of white, educated, middle class, North American women. Women's theology, even if designated "feminist," actually takes shape in the Americas in multiple varieties—*mujerista*, *womanist*, and *Latina*—and Asian and African women are bringing their own cultures to the conversation.

Yet, for all its concreteness, feminist ethics issues a universal moral imperative: *Justice for women!* The agenda of feminist ethics is the recognition of our humanity, our dignity, and our equality with men. Women's basic *human needs* are the same as those of men; women's potential *contributions to the common good* are equal to those of men; therefore women's full *social participation* is as important as that of men; and women's *human rights* are the same also.¹

The primary challenge I want to address is not the perhaps most obvious one implied by my title: making feminist theology more accountable to the *differences* among women's situations worldwide. This is an important task, of whose indispensability to the integrity of the feminist perspective we have been made vastly more aware by other participants at this convention. Maria Pilar Aquino, for instance, has insisted that, although varieties of women's theology converge on a similar agenda and goals, an ethic of the full humanity of women must always come out of women's situation as women. We also think of Ada María

¹With recent Catholic social tradition, I interpret the full dignity and humanity of women in terms of social participation, rather than on the liberal model of autonomy and privacy. We should not, however, bash liberalism without recognizing the tremendous strides liberal philosophies of rights have allowed us to make in this century toward international recognition of equality. In fact, without the liberal ethos, would we be able to recognize and reject another part of Catholic teaching—also a social teaching—which affirms motherhood as the ultimate female role without any symmetrical affirmation of parenthood for men?

Isasi-Diaz's phrase, "en la lucha" ("in the struggle"), indicating the site of *mujerista* theology. Theology always comes out of practice, and the practical situation of many women is a struggle for survival.

I want now to complement the particularity of feminism(s) by looking at its other side. Rooted in particularity, feminist theology, especially feminist ethics, issues a global mandate. All cultures must give justice to all women, must ensure that all women's well-being and all women's participation are equal to those of men. *Feminist ethics is inherently particular in its origins; but it is universal in its agenda.* Feminist ethics begins with the particular, with practice, with experience, with the situation—but out of the particular (not over against it) feminists recognize what furthers or damages "full humanity" for women and men.

To outline my central points:

(1) Feminist thinking not only begins with the concrete and particular, but never leaves particularity behind. Moral thinking can happen only in, through, and out of particular life situations.

(2) Yet certain philosophical elaborations of the particularity of feminist thought can blunt the critical edge of its call for social transformation.

(3) Feminist social criticism implies and requires a commitment to something like ethical "objectivity" and "universality," though a better, more historically oriented vocabulary could no doubt be found.

(4) A central contribution of the Roman Catholic tradition of ethics as Aristotelian and Thomistic is commitment to an objective moral order which is reasonably discernible by moral agents in general. This premise undergirds Catholic social ethics. Feminist ethics is well positioned to retrieve and renew this tradition of a reasonable commonality of human experiences and values, not in order to overcome particularity, but as an affirmation of the legitimacy and importance of the most concrete moral struggles.

(5) Many feminists, especially Catholic feminists, do in fact speak in such terms, though with varying degrees of directness.

(6) We have to nuance this tradition (the "natural law" moral tradition) in serious dialogue with so-called "postmodern" philosophies (like those of Foucault, Gadamer, Habermas).

(7) This exchange will change the way we think about and define the meanings of such terms as "objectivity," "universality," and "rationality," and we may seek replacements for them. But the premise of a common experiential ground for an intercultural community of moral discourse is something we cannot afford to abandon.

(8) Ethics as encompassing practices of life, practical action toward specific goals, and especially cooperation across cultural traditions, is the most promising locus of a constructive reconsideration of the commitment to objectivity as emerging out of particularity. Ethics is not just inclusiveness, dialogue, understanding, taking on other mindsets as an experimental second language, or even a "fusion of horizons" understood as mutual transformation. *Ethics in practice*

is not afraid to be critical, judgmental, persuasive, interventionist, and even coercive. We *do* in fact, especially as feminists (or as liberation theologians), suppose that we can *judge* certain practices, institutions, and acts as wrong—for instance the rape of Muslim women in Bosnia—and we are confident that we should and can work to improve women's situations across cultures (whether in matters of sexual self-determination, health, or education).

There is a danger to the moral power of feminist ethics when the particularity on which we rightly insist to correct biased interpretations of "nature" or "divine will" is carried to the point of moral incommensurability or the impregnability of values to external critique. Catholic feminists do not, as a rule, cave in to postmodern proposals which either retreat romantically into the epistemological enclosure of tradition (just as "official" Roman Catholic teaching is itself tending to do on sex and gender issues). We also are, and should be, generally resistant to the tendency of many philosophical feminists to discount cynically, even eagerly, the availability of truth in any tradition (like feminists who satisfyingly but shortsightedly revel in the no-holds-barred deconstruction of all cultural ideals).

The question now before us, likely to remain there for some time, is how precisely and persuasively to reconstruct a historically accountable sense of the inclusiveness of moral truth. I think our hope of so doing lies in the nature of morality as practice, and of ethics as an exercise of a rationality which is above all practical. Both critical theory and liberation theology validate such an approach. From a "Third World" perspective, the Argentinian Jesuit Juan Carlos Scannone writes that rationality has to be given a broader definition, including the sapiential and the symbolic. He worries that exaggerated "ambiguity, plurality, and nihilistic deconstruction threaten capacity for communal initiatives characteristic of the common people," as well as "their capacity for hope and collective action." He proposes that philosophies of "communicative reason" as well as, at the practical level, "base neo-communitarianism," can more successfully combine traditional values such as community, solidarity, and gratuitousness, with modern values, such as historical praxis, political pluralism, rationality, and economic structures which are efficient as well as communitarian.² From a North American Hispanic perspective, Roberto Goizueta similarly promotes a neo-Aristotelian understanding of rationality, in which a praxis of solidarity not only inherently liberates, but also objectively names injustice and oppression in the light of a more authentic ideal of community.³

²Juan Carlos Scannone, "The Debate About Modernity in North Atlantic and Third Worlds," in Claude Geffré and Jean-Pierre Jossua, *The Debate on Modernity (Concilium* 6 [1992] 84-85).

³Roberto Goizueta, "Rediscovering Praxis: The Significance of U.S. Hispanic Experience for Theological Method," in *We Are a People!: Initiatives in Hispanic American Theology*, ed. Roberto S. Goizueta (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 67.

My approach to these questions will have three parts. *First*, I will take up the "postmodern" interpretation of the challenge of cultures, noting that its insistence on difference is generally accompanied at the practical level with something which it is difficult for it to justify theoretically: social and ethical resistance to "domination." Universality is assumed by postmodern thinkers themselves, insofar as their work is advanced under the aegis of an ethical agenda. *Second*, although postmodern philosophy's attack on "modern" models of rationality, knowledge, and moral judgment is cogent, it is neither theoretically necessary nor practically prudent to abandon objectivity and universality as foundations of ethics. A commitment to objectivity and to some discernible universals in human experience is part of our Roman Catholic heritage, is assumed by liberationist ethics, and is borne forward by Catholic feminists writing today. I will begin a reconsideration of Aristotelian approaches to moral thinking, especially its reliance on shared basic dimensions of experience and on practical reason. *Thirdly*, I find use the work of Martha Nussbaum especially useful, but I will show ways in which Catholic theological feminists qualify her project.

I. THE CHALLENGE OF CULTURES IN POSTMODERN PERSPECTIVE

The 1991 film, "No Longer Silent,"⁴ documents the struggles of the women of New Delhi to gain better treatment in a culture which subordinates their interests in virtually every sphere to those of men. Even certain protections guaranteed by the Indian Constitution are not respected in fact. The outlawed dowry custom is often used as a means of extorting money from a married woman's kin. One figure the film follows is a mother persistently hammering at a bureaucratic and sexist legal system to prosecute a son-in-law who burned her pregnant daughter and left her body in his courtyard—because the mother and her husband could not afford to up the dowry ante with the purchase of a motorscooter.

The narrator of "No Longer Silent" is an Indian feminist and organizer of rural women. She notes that among the poor, women are the most poor; among the exploited, the most exploited. Yet women in the audience of a feminist street play smile or titter cautiously as the male character exhorts women, in the name of tradition and religion, to be faithful to their duties to cook, clean, carry wood, raise children, *always in silence*, always within "the lines men have drawn for women." Comments the narrator, "we can laugh at our pain. We can reflect on our own situation and maybe some women who see it will start to work together to change things."

What are we to learn from this film? For one thing, as a visual and spoken medium, rich with the sensible texture of Indian women's lives, it is effective in moving the Western viewer for a few moments closer to the inside of their worldview. More importantly, perhaps, the film is produced by Indian women

⁴International Film Bureau, Inc., 1991.

and portrays Indian women and men, both educated and rural, working together to recreate their own cultural traditions. Maybe the message is just that—Western ethicists can be no more than sympathetic onlookers to a struggle which in the end surpasses our understanding and which can proceed only on its own internal criteria.

In *Remembering Esperanza*, a book which eloquently stresses the elusiveness of any "universal" perspective, Mark Kline Taylor lists three postmodern traits of theology whose appeal lies precisely in their ability to shatter the arrogance of false universals. Postmodern theology, according to Kline Taylor, values a *sense of tradition, celebrates plurality*, and consequently *resists domination or oppression* as "the systemic exercise of authority and power and in burdensome, cruel, and unjust manner."⁵ The acknowledgment of tradition also functions to delegitimize any authority's claim to freedom from location or context. This quality of postmodern theology can sponsor resistance to domination, a task which Kline Taylor finds crucial to biblical Christian identity. Surely Mark Kline Taylor represents many other contemporary theologians when he states that the impact of postmodernism's relativizing and pluralist consciousness (especially obvious, he believes, in feminist critiques of gender difference) can be summarized by saying that "theologians must now, like their colleagues in other fields, work without foundations, i.e., without a touchstone located outside the play of relativizing forces."⁶

The foundationless mission of theology has been accepted—even embraced—by many feminists. Sheila Greave Devaney notes that movements which take historicity as a central concern reject the very idea of "objective, universally valid experience or knowledge," and urges that feminists confront fully "this progressive loss of norms for evaluating claims to truth that we face in the twentieth century."⁷ She takes three Catholic feminists to task—Rosemary Radford Ruether, Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, and even Mary Daly—for not having faced up to this loss. Instead, she accuses, they each propose some kind of feminist vision whose worth is misguidedly premised on a correspondence to "ultimate reality."⁸ Greave Devaney counters with her own view that acknowl-

⁵Mark Kline Taylor, *Remembering Esperanza: A Cultural-Political Theology for North American Praxis* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1990) 37.

⁶*Ibid.*, 37.

⁷Sheila Greave Devaney, "Problems with Feminist Theory: Historicity and the Search for Sure Foundations," in Paula M. Cooley, Sharon A. Farmer and Mary Ellen Ross, eds., *Embodied Love: Sensuality and Relationship as Feminist Values* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987) 92.

⁸*Ibid.*, 90. Rebecca Chopp has similarly faulted Rosemary Ruether for her "abstract" notion of "full humanity," because it seems to postulate "a metahistorical structure" which is "merely realized in historical experience," and to suppose that "we can grasp something independent of our concrete situation" ("Seeing and Naming the World Anew: The Works of Rosemary Radford Ruether," *Religious Studies Review* 15 (1989) 10.

edging "radical historicity" requires us to move away from any "ontological" grounds and to get rid of "referential models of knowledge."⁹

Postmodern feminist theological approaches like these are chartered partly by Nietzsche, but perhaps more explicitly and importantly by Foucault, with his positive ethical agenda of disclosure and resistance. Foucault's philosophy is inspired by the problem of the body as a site of power. No wonder that feminists find his work amenable. According to Foucault the very notion of "sexuality" (as opposed to the body and its pleasures) is a historical construct, deployed in the service of bourgeois power.¹⁰ Foucault takes the "reality" of "sexual" experience apart by a historical study in which he argues, for instance, that the ancient Greeks saw the body and sexual passions much differently.¹¹ Foucault shows that the "nature" of sexual desire, as well as gender expectations of men and women, are variable with culture, and even suggests in a few more extravagant passages that the human body itself is not a cultural constant. In straightforward, if limited, ways this is certainly true, since the pliability of the human face and form have underlain cultural mediations of them from foot-binding and war paint to cosmetic surgery and anorexia. Jean-François Lyotard's words resound with the energetic iconoclasm of Foucault and his followers, when the Lyotard warns, in the final lines of *The Postmodern Condition*, against "the fantasy to seize reality" and charges, "Let us wage a war on totality!"¹²

Some feminists carry this trajectory to the utmost and envision commensurate pliability of the reproductive functions. Some claim it may even be possible soon to overcome the prenatal division of labor, by redesigning supposedly natural physical capacities.¹³ Socialist feminist Alison Jaggar is unafraid of the

⁹"Problems," 93.

¹⁰Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1978). The discourse of sexuality focuses the self-affirmation of the bourgeoisie on the body, via a "technology of sex," and an ever heightening process of medical and psychoanalytic inspection, introspection, and ultimately control. "We are often reminded of the countless procedures which Christianity once employed to make us detest the body, but let us ponder all the ruses that were employed for centuries to make us love sex, to make the knowledge of it desirable and everything said about it precious. . . . The irony of this deployment is in having us believe that our 'liberation' is in the balance" (159).

¹¹Sexual desire was a drive requiring integration into a full life, just as the appetite to eat and drink. The fulfillment of sexual desire was not evaluated so much by the sex of the partners, as by the activity or passivity of their roles. For a free, adult male, master of his own life, only the active role was honorable.

¹²*The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 1984) 82.

¹³"This transformation might even include the capacities for insemination, for lactation, and for gestation so that, for instance, one woman could inseminate another, so that men and nonparturitive women could lactate and so that fertilized ova could be transplanted into women's or even into men's bodies. These developments may seem farfetched,

antimetaphysical corollary and summons women to "reconstruct reality" from their own standpoint.¹⁴ Postmodern ethics is not necessarily nihilistic—it is in its own way positive and constructive, for it identifies and seeks to overturn real injustices in the world as "dominations." But postmodern philosophy models its discourse as "war"—an endless series of usurpations in which winners are established by violence and become losers in their turn. Is this philosophy adequate to its own practical program? Foucault, for one, implies in practice both a categorical imperative (Resist domination!) and a basis for truth claims (You can recognize both domination and resistance when you see them).

II. RECONSTRUCTING COMMON GROUND

Toward the end of the film the narrator of "No Longer Silent" gives us a practical manifesto of solidarity and hope which is especially pertinent to cultural variation in the virtually universal suffering of women:¹⁵ "We see ourselves linked to women in other parts of the world in our struggle to go forward." This vision of unity does not wait for a "foundationalist" rationale, but comes straight out of a practical agenda to address basic human needs. In an obvious way, cultural variety challenges us to respect cultural differences. But imperialisms of class, race, or continent are not the only dead end for feminist ethics. Another is the self-silencing of social protest by announcement of plurality as ultimate. Only if a revolutionary critique can be validated as something more than a power shift, can it fend off cynicism and inspire practical work toward a new social consensus.

This project is already being carried forward. Rosemary Radford Ruether's manifesto has become the motto of many Roman Catholic feminists: "The critical principle of feminist theology is the promotion of the full humanity of women." Whatever denies full humanity to women "must be presumed not to reflect . . . the authentic nature of things."¹⁶ Feminist theology begins from the standpoint

but in fact they are already on the technological horizon" (Alison M. Jaggar, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* [Brighton, Sussex: Harvester Press, 1983] 132; see also 76).

¹⁴Ibid., 389. Along the same lines, "socialist feminists view knowledge as a social and practical construct and they believe that conceptual frameworks are shaped and limited by their social origins" (369-70). See also, Sarah Franklin, "Deconstructing 'Desperateness': The Social Construction of Infertility in Popular Representations of New Reproductive Technologies," in Maureen McNeill, Ian Varcoe and Steven Yearley, *The New Reproductive Technologies* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1990) 200-29.

¹⁵See Christine Gudorf, "Women's Choice for Motherhood: Beginning a Cross-Cultural Approach," in Anne Carr and Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, eds., *Motherhood* (Concilium 6 [1989]).

¹⁶*Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983) 18, 19. Ruether adds,

This principle is hardly new. In fact, the correlation of original, authentic human nature (*imago dei*/Christ) and diminished, fallen humanity provided the basic structure

of women's subordination, and promotes a prowoman liberating agenda; *Catholic* feminist theology furthers this agenda in relation to an ideal of full human moral agency and well-being which not only includes men, but measures the goal by a presumably common standard. As Margaret Farley has recently put it, feminism makes a case for a "common morality" which goes beyond the feminist political agenda as such. Whatever the differences of culture and history, the experience of what it means to be "a human person" makes it possible, even "across time and place," "to condemn commonly recognized injustices and act for commonly desired goals." In her own experience of listening to women from parts of Asia and Africa, and from Central and Latin America, Farley writes, she has encountered feminist theologians who "are as opposed to unmitigated moral relativism as to false and inadequate universalisms."¹⁷

I note that women who are practically involved in the most desperate sorts of struggles for women's very lives do not resort to any rhetoric of the incommensurability of worldviews, but appeal straight to the heart of our common humanity. One example: an intercontinental conference of Third World women theologians which met in Mexico in 1986 issued a final document which noted women's different situations, and the centrality of Third World women's faith perspective; but it still concluded with the aim to "deepen our commitment and solidarity work toward *full humanity for all*."¹⁸ Maria Pilar Aquino, a Mexican feminist working in the U.S., who was recently inaugurated as the President of ACHTUS (Academy of Catholic Hispanic Theologians in the U.S.), also insists that the poverty and dehumanization which result from "patriarchal, imperialistic capitalism" can only be resisted successfully if the "perspective of women

of classical Christian theology. The uniqueness of feminist theology is not the critical principle, full humanity, but the fact that women claim this principle for themselves. Women name themselves as subjects of authentic and full humanity. (19)

See also, Ruether, "The Development of My Theology," *Religious Studies Review* 15 (1989) 1-4, where she reiterates this principle and affirms the goal of "a redemptive community that encompasses all people."

¹⁷Margaret A. Farley, "Feminism and Universal Morality," in Gene Outka and John P. Reeder, Jr., eds., *Prospects for a Common Morality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993) 178-79.

¹⁸"Final Document: Intercontinental Women's Conference," in Virginia Fabella, M.M. and Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *With Passion and Compassion: Third World Women Doing Theology* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1989) 184; my italics. On June 16, 1992, *The New York Times* reported that the Global Campaign for Women's Human Rights, backed by 950 women's organizations worldwide, seized the center of attention at a United Nations World Conference in Human Rights, held in Vienna, by showcasing the personal testimony of women about WWII sexual slavery in Japan, the terrorism of the Shining Path in Peru, and the violence against Palestinians under Israeli occupation. Women told of particular experiences of suffering, and joined together in their demand for international recognition of women's human rights.

accords priority to the achievement of women's human integrity and emphasizes the right of humanity for all women and men."¹⁹

Some authors placing ethics in an intercultural context have fruitfully highlighted certain Aristotelian-Thomistic categories such as praxis, practical reason, and prudence, in order to renew the foundations of ethics after the postmodern critique. These categories can promote a phenomenological, inductive, and historical epistemology, while preserving a commitment to truth in moral knowledge.

The Roman Catholic tradition of ethics, as an Aristotelian-Thomistic "natural law" tradition, represents a commitment to an objective moral order, knowable by reasonable reflection on human experience itself, especially on the purposes and values all societies share. Praxis and practical reason, as guided by basic human value experiences, may be able to advance a postmodern project to reestablish reliability in moral reasoning. If human experience discloses moral values, then practical reason is the ability to discern those values within concrete choices, actions, and practices. Prudence is the intellectual virtue which allows us to choose rightly in realizing those values within the complexity and occasionally the conflict of a full human life. Aristotle and Thomas distinguish the theoretical from the practical reason, and assign the consideration of "truth" only as the end of the former. The practical intellect, in contrast, is ordered to action, to matters of a contingent character, which cannot have unchanging status. (The exception may be the formal "first principle" of the practical reason, "Do good and avoid evil," whose exact interpretation is debated.) But the fact that both Aristotle and Aquinas not only speak of universal human inclinations which ground the values guiding actions, but also assume that it is possible to speak of moral virtue and of reasonably discerned "practical rectitude" in morality, demonstrates that they certainly applied standards of truth and falsity to practical action as well as to contemplation.

A more complex understanding of reason than the deductive or a priori Cartesian-Kantian model is implied as soon as historical, committed praxis is presupposed as the context in which moral thinking takes place. Truth in morality emerges very much from concrete locations in which both the affections and the cognitive powers of discernment guide us in the achievement of "true good" for ourselves and others, given the practical circumstances in which we act.²⁰

¹⁹Maria Pilar Aquino, "Doing Theology from the Perspective of Latin American Women," in Roberto S. Goizueta, ed., *We Are a People! Initiatives in Hispanic American Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993) 91.

²⁰As Catholic feminists such as Pilar Aquino, Elsa Tamez, Sidney Callahan, and Margaret Farley have noted, reason should not be separated in any dichotomous way from the emotions and affections. In a textual analysis of Thomas, Brian Johnstone rejects both a dichotomy between the practical and the speculative reason, and a dichotomy between reason and will, insofar as we seek in action that which attracts us as good. See Brian V. Johnstone, "The Structures of Practical Reason: Traditional Theories and Contemporary

Robert Schreiter notes that praxis is today understood as the ensemble of social relationships that include and determine the structures of social consciousness," including both theory and action as dialectical moments within praxis.²¹ Insofar as theory reflects on the precise nature of social relationships, it illumines oppression and is the first step toward transformation.

As the experience of liberation theologians shows, the reflective moment of theology often emerges precisely because of a concrete experience of injustice and the already-beginning mobilization of forces of change out of the experience of the oppressed peoples themselves. But the theological moment is not subsequent to or detached from the experiential and practical; the authenticity of theological claims not only arises from, but is validated by, the quality of the communal praxis theological "truth" is able to engender.

An example of authentic Christian praxis which is already and intrinsically liberating, and which engenders feminist theology and action, is given in Maria Pilar Aquino's description, in *Our Cry for Life!*, of Latin American base communities.

A genuine perspective of solidarity and equal participation gives rise in the church base communities to an awareness of the grave problems suffered by women and encourages them to take the necessary action to uproot machismo. In the church base communities women denounce the many injustices that have been committed against them for centuries and summon women and men to struggle collectively to eradicate the ancient evil.²²

Gustavo Gutiérrez has given this dynamic a classic expression for theology:

Theologians will be personally and vitally engaged in historical realities with specific times and places. They will be engaged where nations, social classes, and peoples struggle to free themselves from domination and oppression by other nations, classes, and peoples. In the last analysis, the true interpretation of the meaning revealed by theology is achieved only in historical praxis.²³

Indeed, with David Tracy we may affirm that practical theology is inherently transformative, and even that "there is never an authentic disclosure of truth which is not also transformative."²⁴

Questions," *The Thomist* 50 (1986) 425.

²¹Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1985) 91. Aristotle distinguished *praxis* from both *theoria* and *poiesis*, however.

²²*Our Cry for Life! Feminist Theology from Latin America* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1993 [forthcoming, October]) manuscript p. 72.

²³*A Theology of Liberation*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1988) 10; see also 12: The theology of liberation is "a new way to do theology. Theology as critical reflection on historical praxis is a liberating theology, a theology of the liberating transformation of the history of humankind. . . . This is a theology which does not stop with reflecting on the world, but rather tries to be part of the process through which the world is transformed."

²⁴David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of*

The theological construal of theory and praxis as interdependent moments in a communal praxis which grounds truth historically without relativizing it out of existence, is an answer to the cultural and philosophical discovery of "otherness." Philosophies of otherness and difference have not stopped with dethroning totalitarian philosophical systems; they continue guerrilla warfare against the commonality of human moral experience, without which intercultural critique lacks moral authority. Some philosophical parallels to the theological counterattack are the work of "the Frankfurt school" and of "critical theory," which renovate rather than demolish the rational optimism of the Enlightenment.

Gadamer and more especially Habermas, for instance, seek new ways into the unity of reason *through* the plurality of historical existence. Gadamer accepts the differences of traditions, texts, interpreters, and interpretations; but he adopts an optimistic stance toward understanding, anticipating that open communication will lead to a "fusion of horizons" within historical consciousness, a fusion in which the tension between text and interpreter is dissolved. Habermas worries not only about failures to fuse, but, more seriously, about pseudocommunication, in which mutual misunderstanding leads to false consensus. His theory of communicative reason combats ideological distortions (and the resurgence of neoconservatism) by establishing culturally universal presuppositions of genuine exchange between traditions or standpoints: equality, freedom, tolerance, use of persuasion over violence in achieving a successful exchange.

One question which has been put to Habermas concerns the universality of these values; is it only in the modern West that communication is thought to be structured necessarily by equality and tolerance?²⁵ Even though Habermas's choice of terms may reflect a Western bias, his insight is that genuine communication assumes some sort of mutual respect and personal consent of the partners, even when they are related hierarchically, and even if certain individuals or groups are ruled out of the realm where respectful and consensual communication can take place. But I would add the question whether it is adequate to weight communication so heavily toward individuality and freedom, without also noting the social nature of the one speaking and the one being heard. A fundamental human correspondence of potential conversation partners is the condition of possibility of communication, as well as of the prior capacity to imagine communication, to desire it, and to anticipate that one's speech can be heard and may be reciprocated. To use the paradigm of communicative discourse is to presuppose that there is some commonality of human experience and outlook (however culturally mediated) within which discussion of differences is intelligible.

The issue is whether communicative discourse among traditions is a fortuitous and highly occasional affair, as Alasdair Macintyre, Gadamer, and Habermas

Pluralism (New York: Crossroad, 1981) 78.

²⁵William C. Placher, *Unapologetic Theology: A Christian Voice in a Pluralistic Conversation* (Louisville KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1989) 80.

seem to assume. Or can we assume that we have an ability and a responsibility to engage other traditions on matters of great practical significance? Among Catholic theologians, especially ethicists, there is a working assumption that any two traditions with the occasion for conversation can have a meaningful exchange. When a matter of justice is at stake, communication should not be limited to free exchange of ideas or mutual permeation of horizons; criticism, argument, judgment, and action are required to transform specific situations toward objectively greater human well-being. As we have seen, this is precisely the way feminists and other liberation theologians approach "foreign" traditions and engage them in moral exchange toward political results. Serendipitous, if honest, "conversation" is not enough from the Catholic feminist point of view.

The work of the Catholic fundamental theologian, David Tracy, is helpful in establishing a model of intercultural ethics which assumes the possibility of communication without concealing its historical nature. Especially relevant are his notion of "the classic," of "relative adequacy" as a standard of truth, and of "analogy" as a model of knowledge. Any text (or myth, event, work of art, or ritual) comes out of a particular tradition; but a classic text is one which has disclosive power beyond that tradition, an "excess of meaning" able permanently to address the great human questions in an indefinite succession of historical situations.²⁶ The theory of the classic goes beyond the theory of communicative action in a significant way, insofar as it presupposes the general *reliability* of communication among traditions, by means of their classics. Further, Tracy suggests a possible replacement of the term I have used, "universality," in referring to the reliability and generalizability of truth judgments in ethics: "analogy." Analogical models of knowledge have a prominent history in the Catholic tradition. What analogy may accomplish for us in intercultural feminist ethics is an ability to affirm similarity in difference, and true knowing without reduction.²⁷ As Tracy cautions in *Dialogue with the Other*, we should be "suspicious of how easily claims to 'analogy' or 'similarity' can become subtle evasions of the other and the different."²⁸ Yet, though dignity in the family, adequate health care, a decent education, and fair gender roles in the public realm may not all amount to exactly the same thing in every culture, we *can* understand and evaluate justice and injustice in different cultures by virtue of their resemblance-in-difference to our own experience.

Neither the revelatory power of the classic, however, nor the analogy's mediation of truth meet an ahistorical standard of absolute certainty. Tracy proposes a standard of "relative adequacy": "relative to the power of disclosure and concealment of the text, relative to the skills and attentiveness of the

²⁶*Analogical Imagination*, 14, 102.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 408.

²⁸David Tracy, *Dialogue with the Other: The Interreligious Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 42.

interpreter, relative to the kind of conversation possible for the interpreter in a particular culture at a particular time. Somehow conversation and relatively adequate interpretations suffice."²⁹ The reason that they suffice for feminist ethics is that they are appropriate to its origin and outcome as practical and historical at both ends—though not “relative” in the strong, deconstructionist sense.

To carry the best of our tradition forward, we require a postmodern account of *rationality*—not a marginalization of rationality as ultimately unnecessary to the assertion of truth claims. We must find a responsible way back to rationality through pluralism, perhaps through a more Aristotelian postmodernism. By combining the historical consciousness of postmodern thinkers and the inductive ethical approach of Aristotelian-Thomistic ones, perhaps we can ground truth claims in a culturally mediated but reliable stratum of common human experience which guarantees that conversation about social change can and does happen among traditions and communities. Such a model of conversation would look more like Tracy than like Gadamer, Habermas, or Macintyre, in that it would assume, not merely hope for, meaningful and productive intercultural ethical exchanges which secure real results for human well-being. Given the crying injustices worldwide of poverty, war, hunger, and oppression of whole peoples, and of women among all peoples, we cannot afford to let our intercultural conversations be merely accidental or serendipitous, nor our agreements merely a matter of luck.

III. FEMINIST EXAMPLES

The work of the philosopher Martha Nussbaum provides one model of Aristotelian practical rationality. She asserts truth claims from within an inductive, historical approach to the universals in moral experience, and she develops specific applications for women.³⁰ As she notes, cross-cultural debate about justice certainly does and will go on, philosophically justified or not, especially as communication increases among societies.³¹ She gives an example of development from a village in Bangladesh which demonstrates that a relativist ethic is ultimately irrelevant to social change, and that change and even dialogue about it require some conception of the good which can be grounded in the experience of culturally different working partners.

An international development agency tried to provide the women from this village with literacy materials to improve their uniformly low status. Like the women in *Silent No Longer*, they worked harder, ate less, got sicker, died earlier,

²⁹David Tracy, *Pluralism and Ambiguity* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987) 22-23.

³⁰“Introduction,” in Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen, eds., *The Quality of Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993) 4.

³¹“Aristotelian Social Democracy,” in *Liberalism and the Good*, ed. R. Bruce Douglass, Gerald R. Mara, and Henry S. Richardson (New York: Routledge, 1990) 203-52.

and were less respected than men. However, these women also had no interest in education, since their imaginations were unable to encompass what an educated female life would be like, or what advantages it would bring. They had no role models. The situation called for some standard of change external to the community itself; but it also called for concrete engagement with the community women's experience. Change did not begin until the researchers began to look at women's actual functions and opportunities in more depth, asking what might be important to them over a complete life. At last, the women themselves became involved, in women's cooperatives in the village, which led to transformations on a number of levels, including gender relations and production, as well as education. The Western women and the rural women in Bangladesh were finally able to achieve results, because, despite vast differences in culture, they "recognized one another as fellow human beings, sharing certain problems and certain resources, certain needs for fuller capability and certain possibilities for movement toward capability," as well as with the imagination and humor to identify with one another and envision mutual change.³²

According to Nussbaum, it is evident to an Aristotelian that the liberal aims of access and liberty are inadequate foundations of real structural change. The Bangladeshi women failed to take advantage of access to education because they could not see why it would matter. The Western women had to learn that education might not matter much unless other factors changed too. Change was required from both "an inquiry into the goodness and full humanness of various functionings, and into the special obstacles faced by deprived groups."³³ They were able to undertake this inquiry together once they engaged at the practical level.

Nussbaum's constructive account of moral judgment and truth centers both on practical reason and on the reliability of certain aspects of human experience in disclosing the goods which constitute a full human life. (Moral obligation consists in ensuring that all persons enjoy the capability to exercise those functions which lead to the goods constitutive of human flourishing.) Her premise is that there is a convergence across cultures, exhibited for instance in their myths and storytelling, about certain areas of experience which constitute humanness.

She offers a revisable list of these convergent experiences: mortality, the human body (hunger and thirst, need for shelter, sexual desire, mobility), capacity for pleasure and pain, cognitive capability (perception, imagination, thought), early infant development, practical reason, affiliation with other human beings, relatedness to other species and to nature, humor and play, separateness, and strong separateness (the peculiarity of one's whole life, not just spatial and

³²Ibid., 236-37.

³³Nussbaum, "Aristotelian Social Democracy," 214-15. She takes the example from Marty Chen, *A Quiet Revolution: Women in Transition in Rural Bangladesh* (Dhaka: BRAC, 1986).

temporal separateness).³⁴ Of these, she believes, the most distinctively human are practical reason and affiliation (corresponding to Aristotle's definition of "man" as a rational and social animal), and they give a shape to the whole.

Two further basic human experiences might supplement Nussbaum's Aristotelian rendering: religion³⁵ and kinship. At least in the sense that all human beings wonder about the origin of the world and an intelligent purpose behind its fortunes, about the human fate after death, about a larger order of reward and retribution for good and evil, about salvation from their own wrongdoing and suffering, and about a unity of all persons and of the natural world in a dimension transcending history, they are open to an experience that could in a broad sense be called "religious."

I also find it odd that Nussbaum does not include kinship as a basic experience, one whose moral interpretation is certainly at the root of many feminist concerns. Nussbaum puts human relationships in the category of "affiliation," which might include kinship, but tends to connote freely chosen relationships (a "liberal" model). She does mention infant development as a special category, though I would tend to see it as a subcategory of embodiment. Perhaps the inclusion of infancy is a way of getting at the parent-child relation without elevating parenthood to the status of an indispensable experience, or involving the issue of whether men and women are related to infants in the same way. Nonetheless I find it obvious that, cross-culturally, all human beings come in some way or other from the bodies of other human beings. This is a fact of the human condition, basic to our experience, and goes beyond free choice. Moreover, at least for the foreseeable future, the combination of one female and one male parent will be indispensable. Because patriarchy survives in and through the social mediation of biological reproduction, especially by enlarging reproduction and attendant duties into women's virtually exclusive function, a feminist social agenda is not well served by neglect of this dimension of experience.

Nussbaum envisions and responds sensitively to many objections to her theory. Suffice it here to say that she sees the plausibility of making any universalistic claims about experience at all as much more serious than the difficulty in

³⁴Nussbaum, "Aristotelian Social Democracy," 219-24. Certain positive human functionings in these areas are also valued cross-culturally, and it is the capability to so function that morality and policy ought to seek for each human being. The "basic human functional capabilities" are being able to live to the end of a complete human life; to have good health, to avoid nonuseful pain and enjoy pleasurable experiences; to use one's five senses and to imagine, think, and reason; to have attachments to others, to love, to grieve, and to feel gratitude; to form a conception of the good, and to plan one's life around it; to be concerned for animals and nature; to laugh and play, to live one's own life, and to do so in one's own surroundings and context (225). The task of politics is accordingly to structure social life around labor, property, political participation, education, and some pluralism and choice in an individual's specific approaches to the good life.

³⁵Nussbaum explicitly excludes religion, though she allows for religious freedom.

moving from general claims to specific action-guides. The members of this society are no foreigners to the heated, often accusatory, and generally endless discussions about the justification and reliability of specific moral norms ("absolutism" vs. "proportionalism"). Virtuous action, Nussbaum admits, will vary locally. "The Aristotelian virtues involve a delicate balancing between general rules and the keen awareness of particulars. . . . a good rule is a good summary of wise particular choices and not a court of last resort."³⁶ Yet since a particular choice may be the only acceptable specification of the relevant virtue for a repeatable situation, absolute rules are protected, while condemnations of specific kinds of physical acts, in the abstract and apart from circumstances, are not.

The more important and fundamental threat is the fact that even the most basic human experiences are "constructed" differently among cultures. This issue Roman Catholic moral theology has hardly begun to address at all. Nussbaum refuses to preclude the possibility that the grounding experiences of human value are recognizably the same, or to succumb to the notion that "the whole idea of searching for the truth is an old-fashioned error." "Certain ways in which people see the world can still be criticized exactly as Aristotle criticized them: as stupid, pernicious and false," she says, although the standards for such judgments must be known from within practical human life itself. Although contentious relativists like to overestimate disagreement, we can and do sit down to discuss hunger or justice or the quality of women's lives with people from other parts of the world and still find it "possible to proceed as if we are all talking about the same human problem."³⁷

An inductive approach to basic human values with universal status is a model which is not only amenable to, but already functional within, feminist theological ethics. Among those constitutive aspects of human being named by Nussbaum, feminists frequently give heightened practical importance to affiliation

³⁶Ibid., 44.

³⁷Martha Nussbaum, "Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 13 (1988) 46-47. This essay is included in *Quality of Life*.

Nussbaum's account of "nonrelative virtues" can be supplemented by Charles Taylor's account of practical reason as implying and relying upon the possibility of shared knowledge of nonrelative goods. In *Quality of Life* he contributes a chapter called "Explanation and Practical Reason" (208-41). He argues against a mistaken "foundationalist" model of moral argument, which requires that we present facts or principles which "disprove" the opponent's position. What this model neglects is the fact that people are rarely if ever working from basic moral principles which are ultimately opposed. Further, many moral debates, like scientific ones, are comparative; they are about transitions from one state of affairs to another, in which agreement is sought as to whether Y is better than X. A "strongly evaluated goal is one such that, were we to cease desiring it, we would be shown up as insensitive or brutish or morally perverse" (210). Unless we are willing to think in terms of strong evaluation, we cannot lucidly "understand ourselves or each other, cannot make sense of our lives or determine what to do. . . ." (212) See also Taylor's *Sources of the Self*, in which strong evaluation is central to the thesis.

and to the body, as having a special impact on women's experience as moral agents. Others note separateness and strong separateness as lacking in women's experience and as necessary to women's as well as men's well-being.

The concern with affiliation is often expressed in terms of relationality and sociality, as well as the inclusion within justice as fairness of a standard of "care." In *Hispanic Women: Prophetic Voice in the Church*, Ada María Isasi Díaz and Yolanda Tarango name six presuppositions of their approach, four of which explicitly mention community.³⁸ Margaret Farley explicitly corrects an imbalance between autonomy and relationality, and develops correlative moral norms, justice and care. Feminism can appreciate that, against modern rationalism, "autonomy is ultimately for the sake of relationship," while, against postmodern diffusion of the self into language and social systems, relationship without autonomy is destructive, and, historically, especially so of women.³⁹

Maria Pilar Aquino's *Our Cry for Life* affirms a theology which comes out of a context (praxis), and is therefore specific to the experiences, needs, and insights of women who are not only poor, but who also suffer as women because they are women, and who in addition belong to ethnic or racial groups which are marginalized. The themes of community, solidarity, and embodiment prevail in this book, especially its location of feminist theology within the reality and the interpretation of women's daily lives. Although feminist theologians did not discover "embodiment," they try to look at the bodily basis of experience in a different way, aiming to undermine "normative" descriptions and socializations of women's bodies. An appeal to "embodiment" usually highlights an *aspect* of "existence in and as a body" for a certain context or in relation to a certain moral question. Often "embodiment" is used to oppose either liberalism (Jagger, 186), or abstract Kantian or neo-Scholastic ethics. Embodiment as sexual and parental has been an immense base both of personal identity and of social organization, and it figures prominently in the feminist reconfiguration of the "basic experiences."

The relation between biological sex and social gender roles is a topic most of us take up gingerly because, while denial of any meaningful physical differences between men and women seems counterexperiential, extrapolation of the practical implications of those differences seems inevitably to lead in the direction of domesticity and parenthood as asymmetrically important roles for women. Aquino is admirably fearless toward this feminist's quandary, and is, I think, both Aristotelian and historically sensible as she takes women's reproductive power as a "biological fact," seems to regard maternity as an appropriate and important female role, but refuses to let motherhood override other women's roles, and insists that the social and political interpretation of women's reproduc-

³⁸*Hispanic Women: Prophetic Voice in the Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992) xvii.

³⁹Farley, "Feminism and Universal Morality," 181-85.

tion is the source of their historical and universal domination, even when, as in Western Catholic tradition, that role is idealized. "The problem lies in the politico-ideological treatment of women's power to bear children, not in the power itself."⁴⁰

In summary, Catholic feminists writing today arrange their agenda around those distorted interpretations of the basic human experiences which deprive women of a full human life. Special interests are women's religious experience, embodiment, kinship, affiliation and separateness, along with a renewal of practical reason as accounting for both the particularities and the commonalities of moral experience, and as explaining the nonnegotiable and universal imperative of feminist ethics which arises out of the concrete.

CONCLUSION

There are at least three reasons I think development of the common moral ground implicitly established by (Catholic) intercultural feminist ethics is important:

(1) To avoid buying into a pernicious relativism in ethics. "Difference" does not wipe out commonality, though commonality never exists except in and through difference. Within feminist ethics as practical theology, commonality of meaning and judgment is both necessary in principle and visible in fact.

(2) To avoid buying into and implicitly ratifying the traditionalist relativism of some expressions of Catholicism's moral magisterium, which exempts moral judgment from validation through practical consensus. Since the publication of *Humanae vitae*, if not before, Richard McCormick has been a strong critic of fideist Catholic moral theology, which tries to isolate moral teachings from the reasonable scrutiny and justification implied by the "natural law" tradition itself.

(3) To do a better service to Catholicism's moral tradition than has been done by debates on practical sexual morality, both exhausting and interminable. Postmodern critical philosophy and feminist and other liberation theologies which stress the irreducibility of the particular rightly repudiate all abstract, patriarchal and oppressive ethics of sex and gender. But we can do more than allow our agenda as Catholic moral theologians and feminists to rest with the negative critique of sexual teaching. I venture to say that the specific points against which that critique is largely directed are not the essence of "the tradition," and we should not let the sexual norms debate co-opt our tradition. The essence of the Catholic moral tradition, on sex and gender as on other issues, is commitment to reasonableness within a community of moral discourse, a reasonableness which is practical, inferential, and revisable.

It is a temptation to complete a discourse like this one with a pious ending—about our future hopes, our confidence in Christian promises, or perhaps

⁴⁰*Our Cry for Justice*, 40.

with a biblical verse. My rhetorical aims are different: I mean to depart on a note of warning and exhortation! I also want the remarks I have laid out to be open-ended.

Therefore I leave you with three *questions*:

(1) Has the postmodern deconstruction of Christian tradition, natural law, and metaphysics completely enervated academic, normative ethics?

(2) If normative, theoretical ethics is really no longer possible, then how can members of societies like this (i.e., as academics, not activists) be accountable to suffering in the world which is not our own, and which is therefore always experientially "alien" to us?

(3) If normative theoretical ethics is still possible, then the same question reappears from a different side: How can the Catholic theological academy both account for theoretically and underwrite practically the struggle of women worldwide to live their lives for themselves and for others with human dignity?

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