

R E V I E W E S S A Y

Locating the Church in the World:
Ethnography, Christian Ethics,
and the Global Church

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THIS REVIEW ESSAY will focus on the work of two groups of theologians who have begun to collaborate and produce scholarship. Their work should be of interest to anyone in the field of moral theology and more specifically to those working on the relationship between the church and the world. In the review, I will discuss first the literature that speaks to the importance of ethnographic research for moral theology and ecclesiology. Second, I will turn to the growing movement of Catholic moral theologians who are consciously seeking to do their work in the context of the “world church.”

ETHNOGRAPHY, ECCLESIOLOGY, AND MORAL THEOLOGY

In his introduction to the inaugural book in Eerdmans’ new series, “Studies in Ecclesiology and Ethnography,” Pete Ward asks why more theologians do not engage in fieldwork that might help them find out what is going on in the church and in the world. At a time when theologians profess to be very interested in practices and the embodiment of religious doctrines, why don’t theologians spend more time observing the actual practice of faith?¹ Eerdmans’ new series is the fruit of recent conversations and collaborations among theologians—primarily ecclesialogists, ethicists, and practical theologians—who share an interest in ethnographic research and reflecting upon its theological significance. They believe that the church should be understood as both a theological and social/cultural entity, and therefore to understand the church it is necessary to employ theological and social scientific tools simultaneously.² The contributors to

¹ Pete Ward, “Introduction,” in *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, ed. Peter Ward (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 1.

² Ward, “Introduction,” 2.

the volumes in this series are sensitive to the criticism that there is a risk that the use of social scientific tools can lead to a reductionist understanding of the church—one that essentially robs the church of its theological significance by seeing it as a strictly human invention. On the contrary, these authors insist that theological concerns are driving their research. They believe that you cannot come to an adequate theological understanding of the church without ethnography. Ward explains that he and his colleagues seek to employ a method in which there is “a constant interaction between theories and principles generated from the theological tradition, and careful participative observation of the particularities of an ecclesial situation.”³ He notes that the interaction should work both ways. What we observe and how we understand what we are observing are always deeply informed by a theological understanding of the church; likewise, those beliefs, generalizations, categories, etc. can ultimately be reshaped by what is learned via the observational research.

It is clear that these theologians are not motivated to turn to social science by some kind of inferiority complex about our discipline. They are not embracing ethnography and the tools of ethnography to justify their place in the academy. They are undertaking this turn for theological reasons. Ward offers a Christological basis for an approach to ecclesiology that is deeply informed by ethnographic research. He proposes the image of Christ as the one in whom all things hold together and simultaneously “the head of the body, the church” (Col 1:18). Christ is at the same time the firstborn of creation, in whom all things have their origin and in whom all things are reconciled (Col 1:15-20). Thus to study the church is to study something created through Christ, held together by Christ, and deeply linked to Christ as its head. Obviously, these theological claims cannot be demonstrated through observational research. Ward and his colleagues make no apologies for the fact that the starting point of their inquiry into the church is not a blank slate. Rather, “we see our situated understanding as itself arising from a traditioned ecclesial expression. This expression includes a doctrinal and liturgical canon that forms us as we set about trying to understand the church.”⁴ These authors make it clear that the turn to ethnography does not require setting aside theological categories that help us to understand what is “really going on” when we observe what takes place in church.

This is not to say that there isn’t a temptation to remove the theological dimension of ethnographic research on the church. In the series’ first volume, John Swinton offers a very helpful discussion of hermeneutics, epistemology, and ethnographic research. He

³ Ward, “Introduction,” 2.

⁴ Ward, “Introduction,” 3

acknowledges that “[t]he temptation to collapse theology into ethnography in order to please audiences beyond the church seems irresistible in terms of ‘relevance’ and ‘effective communication’ between church and the world.”⁵ This temptation largely arises from a desire to have research published in secular journals that have a very specific notion of what constitutes “unbiased” research, one that excludes specifically Christian theological categories. There are some forms of ethnographic research on the church in which all theology has been made invisible and that makes perfect sense without any reference to God, but that does not mean all ethnographic research must be that way. Several contributors to this volume make the point that rather than attempting to work in the field of ethnography and publishing on terms entirely set by that field, theologians should seek to use ethnography *as theologians* in their own research.

Drawing largely upon Hans-Georg Gadamer’s model of a fusion of horizons, Swinton explains how ethnographic research might be “sanctified” (by which he means “blessed and set aside for a special purpose”) in a way that makes it theologically helpful. He points out that any “ethnographic look” (i.e., any observation that is derived from ethnographic research) is always value-laden. There is no neutral mode of mere observation in which one sees what is really going on without any act of interpretation. Ethnography always entails hermeneutics. Although this fact might be obvious to most readers of this journal, it is a fact worth repeating because it goes unacknowledged by some natural and even social scientists. For example, in his description of the nature of ethnographic research, John Brewer writes that data must be collected through observation of people in naturally occurring settings “in a way that meaning is not imposed on them from the outside.”⁶ On the surface this sounds quite reasonable and necessary; however, it turns out to be impossible in the sense that one’s framework for understanding what is being observed is never neutral. Offering a strictly phenomenological or psychological explanation for what one observes might seem neutral but in fact such a move reflects a very specific (likely empiricist) epistemological and philosophical point of view. Swinton notes that the question is not *whether* to use a value-laden framework of analysis; that is inevitable. The only question is whether a researcher will acknowledge the hermeneutical nature of observation and speak openly about what he or she brings to the task of interpretation or will he/she pretend that framework does not exist.⁷ Thus theologians should acknowledge the

⁵ John Swinton “Where is Your Church? Moving toward a Hospitable and Sanctified Ethnography,” in *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, ed. Ward, 86.

⁶ John Brewer, *Ethnography* (Buckingham: Open University, 2000), 18. Cited in Swinton, “Where is Your Church,” 78.

⁷ Swinton, “Where is Your Church,” 81-2.

very complex, rich theological categories they bring to their observations of the church, and they should make the argument that these categories are essential for a true understanding of the church and Christian practices.

Even if ethnographic research can be theologically legitimate, we might still ask why it is important or even essential specifically for *moral* theology. *Why* is the turn toward ethnography a move that moral theologians should be aware of and begin to integrate into their own work? And *how* might ethnographic research be helpful for theological ethics? Several essays in the first two volumes of the Studies in Ecclesiology and Ethnography series offer some helpful answers to both of those questions.

Liturgy and the church have become focal points for a lot of work in theological ethics largely due to the influence of Stanley Hauerwas and his considerable body of work on the church, virtue, and Christian practice. The church, in Hauerwas's theology, occupies a central place as a community that bears witness to the truth of the gospel. The church shows the world what it is by offering a contrast—a living example of what the world would look like if in fact the gospel is true.⁸ Liturgy in turn plays a defining role in the life of the church and its task of bearing witness. It is at worship that Christians are formed and their characters reshaped so that they can hear, understand, and enact the gospel story.⁹ According to Hauerwas, "Through liturgy we are shaped to live rightly the story of God, to become part of that story, and are thus able to recognize and respond to the saints in our midst."¹⁰ It is worth noting that this point of view is not unique to Hauerwas, but is widely shared by scholars who write on liturgy and ethics today.¹¹ Hauerwas and many like-minded theologians claim that if we are to understand the meaning of Christianity and if we are to develop a theologically informed understanding of

⁸ Stanley Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church's Witness and Natural Theology* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2001), 214.

⁹ Stanley Hauerwas, "The Gesture of a Truthful Story: The Church and 'Religious Education,'" *Encounter* 43, no. 4 (1982): 325.

¹⁰ Stanley Hauerwas, *Christian Existence Today*. Cited in Christian B. Scharen, "Introduction," in *Explorations in Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, ed. Christian B. Scharen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 1.

¹¹ For example, the late Mark Searle wrote of liturgy as a "rehearsal room" in which actions are repeated over and over again until participants have identified with the part assigned to them as actors in the church and the world. See Mark Searle, "Serving the Lord with Justice," in *Vision: The Scholarly Contributions of Mark Searle to Liturgical Renewal*, ed. Anne Y. Koester and Barbara Searle (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2004), 19. Similarly, Don Saliers writes that good liturgy is a kind of "deliberate rehearsal" of bringing all aspects of our character into harmony with God's will for us. See Don E. Saliers, "Liturgy and Ethics: Some New Beginnings," in *Liturgy and the Moral Self: Humanity at Full Stretch before God*, ed. E. Byron Anderson and Bruce T. Morrill (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1998), 34.

how we should live in the world, our primary theological task is to turn to the church and observe its practices. Rowan Williams reflected this point of view when he wrote in the introduction to his *On Christian Theology* that we learn the meaning of the word God by “watching what the community does... when it is acting, educating, or ‘inducting’, imagining and worshipping.”¹²

Nicholas Healy has pointed out that even if we accept this approach to theology (i.e., that we should understand God and the meaning of Christianity by watching the church) this task is not as straightforward as the model implies. We must decide what exactly should be the focus of our attention—should it be the church as a whole or just part of it? We must decide how the church is to be observed—a data-driven approach, historical analysis, doctrinal, etc.¹³ Healy goes on to complain that, despite their arguments about the importance of “watching” the church, Williams and Hauerwas spend very little time observing actual church life and practice.¹⁴ Instead (in Healy’s view), both Williams and Hauerwas reflect upon what a very limited group of select Christians have done and written.

Healy goes on to question whether it is even possible to make claims about the practices and life of the church as a whole. Here Healy would get support from Robert P. Jones who writes that “any reference to some ideal, monolithic ‘witness of the church’ is problematized immediately by the conflicting witnesses of multiple churches on any concrete issue. The question is not just what Athens has to do with Jerusalem but what the United Church of Christ has to do with Southern Baptists.”¹⁵ Even beyond denominational differences, Healy asks whether we would be justified in speaking of a unified witness even within a given congregation. There is often a diversity of styles of worship, considerable difference of opinion on some important matters of doctrine, and no uniform view regarding what exactly are the implications of faith for living a moral life.¹⁶

Christian Scharen offers some criticisms that are in line with Healy’s. He maintains that the idealized description of church and of worship offered by Hauerwas, Millbank, and others is quite far re-

¹² Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), xii. Cited in Nicholas M. Healy, “Ecclesiology, Ethnography, and God: An Interplay of Reality Descriptions,” in *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, ed. Ward, 182.

¹³ Healy, “Ecclesiology, Ethnography, and God,” 183.

¹⁴ Healy, “Ecclesiology, Ethnography, and God,” 183.

¹⁵ Robert P. Jones, “Ethnography as Revelation: Witnessing in History, Faith, and Sin,” in *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics* (London: Continuum, 2011), 120.

¹⁶ Healy, “Ecclesiology, Ethnography, and God,” 185-7. Healy develops an alternative approach to ecclesiology at length in his book *Church, World and the Christian Life* (Cambridge University, 2000).

moved from the actual beliefs and practices of worshipers.¹⁷ Scharen is in agreement with Hauerwas regarding the theological importance of the church, but he believes that a vague or naïve reference to “the church” is inadequate. As Harald Hegstad argues in the series’ second volume, there is a need for actual data about church belief, practice, and worship.¹⁸

An example from my own recent work may illustrate what I see to be a valid critique of work in liturgy and ethics in the vein of Hauerwas, Williams, and company. For a volume commemorating the publication of *Economic Justice for All* (a pastoral letter on the economy by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops), I contributed an essay entitled “Liturgy, Discipleship, and Economic Justice” that addresses the importance of liturgy for the personal and social transformation that would be necessary to move the United States toward a more just economy.¹⁹ Drawing extensively on contemporary theological writing on liturgy and justice as well as the work of Virgil Michel, the essay analyzes how some fundamental Christian beliefs about human dignity, social equality, God’s special concern for the poor, etc. are deeply inscribed in the Eucharistic liturgy. The essay also discusses how liturgy can be vital for forming people in these beliefs and motivating them to act to bring about a more just world. It paints a very attractive portrait of the liturgy and makes many connections between the Eucharist and the understanding of justice put forward in *Economic Justice for All*. I will not pretend that I didn’t think it was a good essay, and yet after reading the work of Ward, Scharen, Healy, et. al. I have come to see that it has a very serious deficiency in that I did not bother to try to measure the liturgy’s actual impact on the beliefs of people nor did I endeavor to find out how the Eucharistic liturgy is received by believers. Do the people of God experience the liturgy as I described it? Are they able to make the connections that I so carefully described? Does the liturgy ever change the way people think about solidarity and justice? Can you really write an essay on liturgy and formation without providing evidence that people are actually formed in the way that is described?²⁰

¹⁷ Scharen, “Introduction,” in *Explorations in Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, 1.

¹⁸ Harald Hegstad, “Ecclesiology and Empirical Research on the Church,” in *Explorations in Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, ed. Scharen, 41.

¹⁹ Christopher P. Vogt, “Liturgy, Discipleship, and Economic Justice,” in *The Almighty and the Dollar: Reflections on Economic Justice for All*, ed. Mark Allman (Winona: Anselm Academic, 2012), 242-62.

²⁰ I am at least consoled by the fact that I am not alone in my omissions. For example, in *Self and Salvation*, David Ford follows a similar path. In his analysis of that book, Christian Scharen complains that even though Ford’s theoretical framework should lead him to a close and careful study of the formation of a particular religious community, Ford turns instead to Scriptural analysis. See Christian Scharen, “Ecclesiology ‘From the Body’: Ethnographic Notes toward a Carnal Theology,” in *Perspec-*

Christian Scharen helpfully explains why a theological analysis of the words of the liturgy alone is inadequate. Sometimes the congregation totally misses the point. This was the case in Corinth where the Eucharist became a source of division and scandal rather than unity and justice (1 Cor 11:17-22). A more recent example that explains why it is necessary to examine the formative effects of the liturgy as well as how it is received comes from an ethnographic study of worship in Ireland by Siobhán Garrigan. She observed that none of the congregants in any of the Catholic churches she studied received communion under both forms. She wanted to find out why there was a universal refusal to take the cup despite persistent encouragement from the Irish bishops. In her study she found that there was a widespread perception among the laity: "The Protestants, they receive the wine. We do not." Some held the corresponding view, "If we received the wine, we'd be just like the Protestants." Further study revealed that the reluctance was also deeply entwined with Irish history, especially with the British stereotype of the Irish as drunkards.²¹ In effect, despite clear ecclesiastical instruction about full participation in the Eucharistic liturgy, local history and social practices are profoundly formative and perhaps more clearly instructive in the celebration of the Mass. Without careful ethnographic research like Garrigan's there may be no way of knowing what kinds of formative practices are operative. Thus, it is insufficient to explain the meaning of the Eucharist without any reference or investigation into how the liturgy is actually celebrated and understood by particular people. Moral theologians working on liturgy and ethics need to attend to this and similar challenges uncovered by our colleagues studying ecclesiology and ethnography.

CATHOLIC THEOLOGICAL ETHICS IN THE WORLD CHURCH

Over four hundred Catholic ethicists from around the globe gathered in the Italian city of Padua in 2006 for what was billed as the "First Cross-cultural Conference on Catholic Theological Ethics."²² The purpose of the gathering was "to appreciate the challenges of pluralism; to dialogue from and beyond local culture; and to interconnect within a world church not dominated solely by a northern

tives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography, ed. Ward, 55. David F. Ford, *Self and Salvation: Being Transformed* (New York: Cambridge University, 1999).

²¹ Siobhán Garrigan, *The Real Peace Process: Worship, Politics, and the End of Sectarianism* (London: Equinox, 2010), 122. Cited in Scharen, "Ecclesiology 'From the Body'," 60-1.

²² James F. Keenan, S.J., ed., *Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church: The Plenary Papers from the First Cross-cultural Conference on Catholic Theological Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2007). For select papers from concurrent, applied ethics sessions, see Linda Hogan, ed., *Applied Ethics in a World Church: The Padua Conference* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2007).

paradigm.”²³ The organizers of the conference believed that even in an age of international electronic communication and publication an actual gathering of theologians was vital in order to allow participants to get to know one another, to learn to be together and to share ideas with one another. By spending a few days together in Italy what they achieved was “more than simply a sharing of ideas; it was a meeting of persons.”²⁴ The theologians who gathered in Padua judged the conference to have been a success and wanted more.²⁵ A planning committee was formed to take on the formidable logistical and fund-raising work necessary to hold a similar event.²⁶ Four years later (July 24-27, 2010), the “Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church” (CTEWC) group held a second international conference in Trent (Trento, Italy). The second gathering was even more successful than the first if the number of participants is any indicator, drawing over six hundred theologians from nearly 75 countries (compared to four hundred theologians from 67 countries at Padua).

In a retrospective article, James F. Keenan, S.J. (a central figure in planning both conferences who together with Linda Hogan now co-chairs the CTEWC planning committee) called Trento 2010 “a defining moment in church history.”²⁷ That is a very strong claim. While it is always dangerous to judge whether events are “historic” as we live through them, there are good reasons to believe that a genuine and significant movement has grown out of the conferences in Trent and Padua.²⁸ The work presented at those conferences has been published widely and in many translations, but perhaps more importantly the group has begun to organize itself in such a way that it no longer functions merely as a planning body for international conferences. The Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church (CTEWC) organization is becoming a network of scholars committed to building up professional ties among theologians across the globe and to promoting a specific set of priorities for doing moral theology in the twenty-first century. Among other things, the group has established a monthly forum that publishes short theological reflections from contributors recruited from Africa, Asia, North Amer-

²³ Keenan, *Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church*, 3.

²⁴ Keenan, *Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church*, 3.

²⁵ For a helpful analysis of the first conference and the work presented there, see Christopher Steck, S.J., “Catholic Ethics as Seen from Padua,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 39, no. 2 (2011): 365-90.

²⁶ For a full account of the planning of the second conference and what transpired there see James F. Keenan, “What Happened at Trento 2010?” *Theological Studies* 72 (2011): 131-49.

²⁷ Keenan, “What Happened at Trento,” 131.

²⁸ I wish to make clear that my perspective on this organization is not that of a neutral bystander, but an active, invested participant. I presented work at both conferences, and I currently serve on the North American Regional Committee of CTEWC.

ica, and South America, and has sponsored regional events in Nairobi, Bangalore, and Berlin, which complement the global gatherings held in the past.²⁹

In what follows, I explain and assess what this group is proposing regarding the proper shape of moral theology today. I do so by analyzing some of the work that emerged from the Padua and Trento conferences and by looking at the group's stated goals and plans. It will become clear below that a specific theology of the church and the world plays an important role in shaping the mission and self-understanding of this group. Its agenda and approach to moral theology emerge from a sense that it is imperative for theologians and indeed the church itself to locate themselves within the world. Given the large number of theologians who have participated in these conferences and the growing engagement of theologians with CTWEC's new initiatives, consideration of the publications and plans of this organization will have a significant impact on how people in our field understand the church and their place in it, and how they engage "the world."

Sometimes explicitly and other times implicitly, the CTEWC group sets forth a particular understanding of how moral theologians should do their work and why. The group is offering an agenda both in terms of what questions should be taken up and how they should be analyzed theologically. I will highlight three overlapping priorities or qualities of the work that have come out of the CTEWC conferences. Together, these three aspects illuminate a discernible agenda and a way of doing moral theology: 1) the importance of being a "listening church" and reading the signs of the times, 2) the central importance of dialogue for theological ethics, and 3) a simultaneous insistence on the importance of the contextual and the possibility of a universal ethic. Along the way, I also uncover important beliefs about the church and the world that are embedded in this approach to moral theology.

Perennial questions facing moral theologians pertain to our research agendas: What should we write about? Should we dig deeply into Augustine or Aquinas? Should we put ourselves into dialogue with moral philosophers? Should we focus on complicated quandaries or provide a simple vision of how to pursue discipleship in everyday life? Of course, moral theologians are doing all of these things and more, but at the same time choices are always being made about what papers to include in conference programs, what books to publish, what topics should be the focus of an issue of a journal, and so on. Thus, the question of priorities is very real. It is worthwhile to be attentive to the priorities being promoted by the CTEWC group and

²⁹ For more on the group's organizational structure, mission, newsletters, forum, etc., see www.catholicethics.com.

others in the field and to assess whether they are worthy of being promoted.

The CTEWC group clearly supports the point of view that “the world” should be granted a very substantial role in setting the research agenda for moral theologians. The very first plenary session in Padua was devoted to the question: “How Can Theological Ethicists Respond to the World’s Needs?” Antonio Papisca’s response to that question asked ethicists to attend to issues of human rights—to expound upon the basis of such rights, but more importantly to develop practical proposals regarding how human rights can be protected and promoted via programs, public policies, and individual actions.³⁰ Adela Cortina pointed to the importance of theological work on economic justice and economic systems “because they affect people’s lives and the sustainability of nature.”³¹ In her view, the economy must be on the agenda for moral theologians because of its enormous impact on the lives of all people and also because there are teleological questions and choices always at play in the economic realm. Although Cortina recognizes that “theological ethicists cannot resolve... economic problems” they must commit themselves to working with specialists in business, economics, and social sciences to understand the goals of economic activity and how that activity should be shaped to create a good society.³² For both authors, theologians must find ways to move people toward a clearer understanding of justice, meaning or purpose (e.g., help answering the question “what is the economy for?”), but also to craft practical solutions to problems that cause human suffering or impede human flourishing.

James Keenan’s essay introducing the Trento conference shares a similar view of the sort of questions moral theologians should be investigating. He writes that “[ethicists] are needed because things are not as they could be. As the critics and reformers of society and church, we seek to practically bridge the gulf between who we are and who we can be. Thus, we always begin with the premise that there is a deficit in our location, and therefore, we need to work together to find a way to remedy it.”³³ Although Keenan’s description still emphasizes action, his view of the task of moral theology is more textured than merely “responding to the world’s needs.” He highlights the importance not only of social criticism and practical action, but also the development of good character. Furthermore, Keenan

³⁰ Antonio Papisca, “The Needs of the World and the Signs of the Times: The Challenge of Human Rights,” in *Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church*, 11-19.

³¹ Adela Cortina, “Challenges of Economic Activity in a Global World,” in *Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church*, 20-8 at 22.

³² Cortina, “Challenges,” 20-1.

³³ James F. Keenan, “Introduction: The Trento Conference,” in *Catholic Theological Ethics Past, Present, and Future: The Trento Conference*, ed. James F. Keenan (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2011), 6.

clearly sees that the agenda of moral theology goes beyond practical problem-solving. There is room for fundamental moral questions as well. Writing on the agenda at Trento and also the agenda for the field as a whole, Keenan explains:

We could go to Trento to share fundamental insights and claims, to reflectively and respectfully consider the needs of today within the context of a world church and its evolving and constantly emerging traditions. But we could also explore ways that for the next twenty-five years we too could dispute about authority, conscience, sin, gender, sustainability, health, economy, natural law, history, the right to food, the need to love, family, the emotions, and yes, even the traditions themselves.³⁴

Thus while attending to the needs of the world is an important feature of the agenda of this movement, it is not advocating “applied ethics” at the expense of fundamental moral theology. Clearly there is an emphasis on the former, but there is room and a need for both.

Endeavoring to hear the needs of the world is not the only way in which “listening” is emphasized by participants in this movement. Including a variety of voices is also important. The conferences were designed in a way that emphasized the importance of dialogue and organizers paid very careful attention to issues of “voice.” Keenan writes of how the organizers sought to bring specific groups of individuals into the conversation: members of the hierarchy, “new” or young scholars, women theologians, and scholars from the global South. It should be noted that the desire to include these groups was followed through with action in the form of invitations to archbishops to participate in two plenary addresses and financial support for young scholars and for theologians (especially women) living in the global South. These decisions are in line with the group’s desire to be aware “of those not heard, rejected, oppressed, or abandoned,” but also reflect an understanding of the church and the place of theologians in it.³⁵ Here the model is very inclusive and collaborative. The hierarchy must be included, but it seems only as one voice among others.³⁶

The model for doing moral theology put forward by CTEWC at their conferences and in the events that they have planned for the

³⁴ Keenan, “Introduction,” *Catholic Theological Ethics Past, Present, and Future*, 1-2.

³⁵ Keenan, “Introduction,” *Catholic Theological Ethics Past, Present, and Future*, 7.

³⁶ Christopher Steck notes that one certainly did not find at Padua the model of theological scholarship practiced in which the bishops teach and theologians strive to provide good reasons to believe what is taught. However, the theologians participating in the Padua conference did move “within the linguistically and theologically bounded world of Catholicism,” where “official Church pronouncements, not recent theological scholarship, are the guides and touchstones for their scholarly thinking.” See Steck, “Catholic Ethics as Seen from Padua,” 370.

future is decisively marked by dialogue. There is an insistence that theologians must be in dialogue with the Magisterium, with each other, and perhaps most importantly with “the world.” This model of theological engagement was fully in evidence at the opening session of the Trento conference. Whereas Padua began by encouraging theologians to listen to the needs of the world, the opening plenary in Trento began with the theme of “Ethics and Interreligious Dialogue in a Globalized World.” Before an audience of Catholic theological ethicists, a Roman Catholic archbishop (Bruno Forte), a Protestant theologian (Mercy Amba Oduyoye), and an Islamic scholar (Ahmad Syafi Ma’arif) from three different continents (Europe, Africa, and Asia) were called upon to discuss the nature of ethics in a globalized world.

This session not only modeled the importance of dialogue, three scholars also offered varying but interwoven reasons *why* an interreligious, theological dialogue about ethics and the problems of the contemporary world is essential. Mercy Oduyoye offered perhaps the most basic reason: No community can solve problems in today’s world on its own, and therefore we must learn to diagnose and solve problems together.³⁷ Ahmad Syafi Ma’arif spoke more specifically to why the world actually needs theological analysis in order to understand the contemporary situation rightly and therefore needs to be in dialogue with theologians. He locates the problems of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries ultimately in secularism and anthropocentrism—in an intentional attempt to forget God. Secularism and an excessive focus on the human person led to an exaggeration of the scope of human freedom and to a forgetfulness about transcendence.³⁸ Bruno Forte focused primarily on identity in providing reasons for the imperative of dialogue across many boundaries. The church has no choice but to engage the world because the church can never be entirely separated from the world. The identity of the people who make up the church (including moral theologians) is always informed by multiple sources.³⁹ As Archbishop Forte put it very pointedly in his opening address, “The illusion of purity of identity and

³⁷ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “A Protestant Perspective,” in *Catholic Theological Ethics Past, Present, and Future*, ed. Keenan, 19.

³⁸ Ahmad Syafi Ma’arif, “A Muslim Perspective,” in *Catholic Theological Ethics Past, Present, and Future*, 28-30.

³⁹ Drawing upon Kathryn Tanner’s work, Vincent Miller makes the case that this is true, not only for contemporary Christians, but throughout Christian history. “Syncretism and cultural mixture mark [Christianity] from the beginning.” Vincent J. Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 25. See Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997).

race is pure folly.”⁴⁰ People today have plural or “mixed identities,” informed simultaneously by multiple belongings. Individuals, institutions (even the church), and cultures are engaged in a mixing and mingling interchange. According to Forte, if a culture or institution is to remain alive, it must be able to enter into a process of dialogical exchange.

Miguel Ángel Sánchez Carlos provides a similar reading of the theological significance of the fluidity of identity and culture. He notes that in many urban contexts today, culture is often a hybrid formed from multiple sources and adds that Christianity is no longer at the forefront of the production of culture. Instead the church is more likely to be shaped by culture rather than the other way around.⁴¹ Aloysius Cartagenas makes a similar point later in the Trento volume where he notes that the church has lost the privileged socio-political location it once enjoyed. It no longer sits on the same plane as leaders of nation-states in public discourse. Furthermore, the bodies that once served as social carriers of Catholicism into the public sphere (Catholic charities, Catholic social groups, reform movements, etc.) have also substantially declined.⁴² One lesson that must be learned by the church and theological ethicists from these facts of life is the inescapability of collaboration and partnerships when addressing the moral issues of our day. Sánchez Carlos concludes that “we should seriously question the quality of life in our cities and look for ways to collaborate with others who from different mystical and logical perspectives are working to build more humane cities, especially for the impoverished or excluded majorities around them.”⁴³

The nature of identity today and the church’s location in the world also has an impact on what sort of argumentation should be put forward by theological ethicists. Sánchez Carlos and many other theologians who presented at the CTEWC conferences believe that theologians and the church more generally must come forward with ethical proposals that are understandable and reasonable to an audience who is shaped simultaneously by multiple traditions of mean-

⁴⁰ Bruno Forte, “A Catholic Perspective,” in *Catholic Theological Ethics Past, Present, and Future*, 13.

⁴¹ Miguel Ángel Sánchez Carlos, “Urban Life, Urban Ethics,” in *Catholic Theological Ethics Past, Present, and Future*, 168. Here Sánchez Carlos is drawing insight from the 2007 gathering of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean in Aparecida, Brazil. See *Aparecida, Concluding Document: Fifth General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean, May 13-31, 2007* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2008), www.rcpos.org/v2.0/downloads/Concluding%20Document%20CELAM%Aparecida.pdf.

⁴² Aloysius Cartagenas, “The Abuse of Power in the Church: Its Impact on Identity, Reciprocity, and Familial Relations,” in *Catholic Theological Ethics Past, Present, and Future*, 240-1.

⁴³ Sánchez Carlos, “Urban Life, Urban Ethics,” 169.

ing. This mode of argumentation is important not only for dialogue with people outside of the church, but also when writing for the people who make up the church today. Sánchez Carlos is arguing that to write for the church is not to write to a monolithic audience who is shaped only or even primarily by Christian sources. Instead, even members of the church itself have been affected by “cognitive contamination”—the result of a process by which people open up their worldview by seeing similarities and connections between their own beliefs and those of others. The result of this cognitive contamination is that Christians do not have a purely Christian worldview; instead they keep in mind simultaneously multiple worldviews.⁴⁴ For such an audience, Sánchez Carlos believes that theological ethics must embrace a mode of discourse that is concrete and multi-disciplinary in order to be effective.

Even in the midst of all of this emphasis on multiple belongings, diversity of voices, local context and so on, the third important characteristic of the CTWEC organization is its aspiration to a universal ethic of some sort. This comes out most clearly in the notion of universal human rights that is defended in several essays and assumed in others. Of course exactly how you can emphasize particularity and universality at the same time is not always clear. This problem remains one of the great philosophical and theological challenges of our day: the task of finding a way to recognize the importance of culture and context without giving up on the belief that all human beings share some fundamental things in common (which in turn have universal ethical implications). It is clear that this group believes that the way forward is to cultivate scholarship that is deeply rooted in a particular context, but in productive dialogue with an international audience.

LINKING THESE TWO DEVELOPMENTS

The CTEWC movement and theologians engaging in ethnographic research are both pointing to the importance of lived human experience as a source of theology. The level of importance and authority attached to experience varies considerably as do the methods by which individual theologians connected with each of these groups bring data about human experience into dialogue with other theological sources. On the one hand, some theologians like Denise Ackerman insist that without field work and close attention to lived human experience theological analysis is worthless.⁴⁵ Others take a more

⁴⁴ Sánchez Carlos, “Urban Life, Urban Ethics,” 170. The concept of “cognitive contamination” actually comes from Peter Berger.

⁴⁵ She says that “[t]heology done at arm’s length from the reality of the context in which we seek to speak theological words is not worth the paper it is written on.” Denise Ackerman, “From Mere Existence to Tenacious Endurance: Stigma,

measured stand such as Emily Reimer Barry who is adamant about the importance of “listening” and ethnographic research for theology and the church but who also recognizes that “one need not live in a war zone to critique the horrors of war” and there are valid forms of doing theology that do not take ethnographic research as their starting point.

The rise of ethnographic research in theology and the prominent place of “voice” and local reflection in the CTEWC movement point to the need for moral theologians to continue to debate and study how experience functions as a source of moral insight. It is necessary not only to learn to listen, but to be able to explain more systematically and theologically why it is important to do so. In a similar vein, more systematic methods are needed for bringing lived experience into productive dialogue with the Catholic moral tradition and contemporary magisterial teaching. This will take more than assembling the right “voices” for a conference or for a book. Undoubtedly the question of experience and how a global context should inform the way theologians everywhere do their work will be on the agenda of a newly formed CTSA interest group, “Beyond Trento: North American Moral Theology in a Global Church.” As they move forward in their endeavors, theologians connected with the conferences, interest-groups and publications of CTEWC would do well to be attentive to the important work being published in the Studies in Ecclesiology and Ethnography series where theologians are grappling with some of the same questions about the status of the world, the importance of experience, how to engage in interdisciplinary research and so on. The growing strength of these two movements bodes well for our field. **M**

HIV/AIDS, and a Feminist Theology of Praxis,” in *African Women, Religion, and Health: Essays in Honor of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye*, ed. Isabel Apao Phiri and Sarojini Nadar (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2006), 239. Cited in Emily Reimer Barry, “The Listening Church: How Ethnography Can Transform Catholic Ethics,” in *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics* (London: Continuum, 2011), 116.

Originally, the church was a Christian cathedral, but also has been a Greek Orthodox cathedral, a Roman Catholic cathedral, and an Imperial mosque. Today, Hagia Sophia still stands, but it is now a museum, not a church. Visitors to Istanbul can tour the museum, and there are estimates that approximately 10,000 people go through it each day. The Dura-Europos Church is likely the oldest Christian church in existence. Before it was used as a church, however, it is believed that the building was a private home. Today, the site is in ruins, but it was fully excavated during the 1920s and 1930s by a team of French and American archaeologists. Several frescoes were removed during that period, which are visible at the art gallery at Yale University. Christianity is the most widely practiced religion in the world, with more than 2 billion followers. The Christian faith centers on beliefs regarding the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. These letters offer instructions for how the church should operate. The Acts of the Apostles is a book in the New Testament that gives an account of the apostles' ministry after Jesus' death. The author of Acts is the same author as one of the Gospels—it is effectively "part two" to the Gospels, what happened after Jesus' death and resurrection. The final book in the New Testament, Revelation, describes a vision and prophecies that will occur at the end of the world, as well as metaphors to describe the state of the world. The number of Christians around the world has nearly quadrupled in the last 100 years, from about 600 million in 1910 to more than 2 billion in 2010. But the world's overall population also has risen rapidly, from an estimated 1.8 billion in 1910 to 6.9 billion in 2010. As a result, Christians make up about the same portion of the world's population today (32%) as they did a century ago (35%). This apparent stability, however, masks a momentous shift. Christian organizations remain in many cases the only source of information on the size of global movements within Christianity (such as evangelicalism and pentecostalism) and on Protestant denominational families (such as Baptists and Methodists).