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THE SEARCH FOR A GLOBAL ETHIC

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[The author examines in section two of Notes on Moral Theology some of the principal issues that have emerged in recent discussions of the prospect for attaining a common morality in the context of global pluralism. Special attention is given to recent debates about human rights in international contexts. The second part of this article examines recent work undertaken by Hans Küng on this topic.]

THE FACT OF MORAL PLURALISM and the practical and theoretical questions that it raises have been defining issues for moral reflection throughout the modern period. In our own day, the ubiquitous economic and social processes of globalization have once again focused attention on "the prospects for a common morality" (to quote the title of a well-known collection of essays on the topic).[1] For us, this question is perhaps not so shocking as it was to our early modern forebears, since we have had over four centuries to get used to the realities of world-wide moral pluralism. Yet it may well be that we feel the practical urgency of the question even more than they did. The atrocities of the 20th century have resulted in wide-spread, remarkably productive efforts at the international level to articulate minimal standards of conduct that nations must observe not only in their dealings with one another but also with their own citizens. More recently, the increasing global interconnection of national economies has generated similar efforts to establish regional or international standards for labor practices, ecological responsibility, and the like. These standards would seem to presuppose at least a rudimentary common morality that crosses national boundaries. Yet this presupposition is challenged by many not only on theoretical grounds but also because these supposed universal

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[1] *Prospects for a Common Morality,* ed. Gene Outka and John P. Reeder, Jr. (Princeton: Princeton University, 1993). All the articles in this volume are of high quality and worth consulting for an overview of recent debates.

ideas seem to many to represent just one more form of Western imperialism.

It will be obvious that these debates raise far-reaching theological questions, particularly within the context of Catholicism, with its long-standing traditions of social activism and moral universalism. These traditions predispose most Catholic thinkers to agree that we stand in need of developing a common morality that transcends national boundaries, and to be optimistic about the prospects for doing so.

In this Note on Moral Theology, I examine some recent work on the prospects for developing a common morality that crosses national boundaries, focusing primarily but not exclusively on recent discussions of human rights. The literature on these topics is enormous. I will not attempt a comprehensive bibliographic survey. My aim is rather to identify some of the central issues that have arisen in this literature, and to draw out their theological significance. In view of the latter interest, I focus primarily on discussions situated within the fields of theological and comparative religious ethics. In the first part of my overview, I attempt to set forth the main lines of recent debates over human rights as a kind of common morality. In the second part, I examine in more detail one noteworthy contribution to the search for a common morality by a leading Catholic theologian. Finally, I look briefly at some of the theological issues raised by these discussions.

HUMAN RIGHTS AND COMMON MORALITY

Recent debates over the prospects for a common morality have ranged across a wide spectrum of theoretical and practical issues. While I am focusing specifically on the question of human rights, this is by no means the only practical concern informing these debates. For example, a recent article by Thomas Nairn discusses the problems generated by medical experimentation in a society markedly different from the experimenter's own. Should an experimenter respect the norms that would govern research in his or her own community, or should the experimenter abide by principles and values that obtain in the society in which the research is being conducted?[2] To mention another set of issues, the economic side of globalization raises many ethical questions that cannot readily be placed within the framework of human rights, although of course the latter are highly relevant to what Daniel Finn calls "the moral ecology of markets."[3]

[2] Thomas A. Nairn, "The Use of Zairian Children in HIV Vaccine Experimentation: A Cross-Cultural Study in Medical Ethics," *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* (1993) 223–46.

[3] Daniel R. Finn, "John Paul II and the Moral Ecology of Markets," *Theological*

Most fundamentally, the practical concerns that arise out of encounters among representatives of different moralities are not limited to interactions across borders. Thanks to rapidly expanding migration and the displacement of peoples throughout the world, we are all increasingly likely to encounter representatives of different cultural traditions within our national boundaries.

Nonetheless, the practical questions that arise with respect to moral encounters across national borders tend to focus on human rights, and this is not surprising. The experience of Nazi genocide brought home the fact that international relations cannot be understood reductively in terms of relations among nation-states. We must also concern ourselves with the ways in which nations relate to their own citizens and inhabitants, as well as taking account of refugees and others who have no secure status within a given nation. The language of human rights offers a good way of expressing the idea that persons have claims more fundamental than, and independent of, whatever entitlements may accrue through citizenship in a particular country.[4] For this reason, the language of rights has provided the basic framework for considering and trying to negotiate transnational moral standards since the ratification of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948.

I have already mentioned one collection of essays, *Prospects for a Common Morality,* on the general topic of common morality. This anthology, edited by Gene Outka and John Reeder, has exercised wide-spread influence since its publication in 1993 because it offers examples of most of the major positions taken in debates over common morality, at least among English-speaking philosophers and theologians.

This volume begins with Alan Gewirth's defense of his well-known theory that any rational agent is committed by canons of self-consistency to respect the rights of others to the basic conditions for rational agency, including both non-interference and positive support.[5] This appeal to canons of rational self-consistency, which can be traced back at least to Immanuel Kant, is of course not limited to Anglo-American authors. A simi-

Studies 59 (1998) 662–79. For further discussion of the moral issues raised by globalization, not so focused on economic matters, see Howland T. Sanks, S.J., "Globalization and the Church's Social Mission," *TS* 60 (1999) 625–51.

[4] This point is made by David Little in "The Nature and Basis of Human Rights," in *Prospects for a Common Morality* 73–92, at 76–77. For a similar observation, see Sumner Twiss in "Moral Grounds and Plural Cultures: Interpreting Human Rights in the International Community," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 26 (1998) 271–82, at 272–73.

[5] "Common Morality and the Community of Rights," in *Prospects for a Common Morality* 29–52.

lar line is taken by Jürgen Habermas, arguably today's leading German social theorist, who argues for a universally valid morality on the basis of what he describes as discourse ethics: "Briefly, the thesis that discourse ethics puts forth on this subject is that anyone who seriously undertakes to participate in argumentation implicitly accepts by that very undertaking general pragmatic presuppositions that have a normative content."[6] Alan Donagan likewise offers a Kantian defense of a universally binding common morality which is expressed in the Judeo-Christian tradition but does not depend upon the latter's theological claims.[7]

However, not all defenders of some form of a common morality are Kantians. Reading further in *Prospects for a Common Morality,* we find David Little defending a common morality grounded in a kind of intuitionism, on the grounds that our basic sense of the wrongness of certain kinds of actions (e.g. torture) is more fundamental than any moral theory and provides a touchstone for the rightness of all such theories.[8] Little's approach is similar to that of a number of other authors involved in current discussions of common morality. For example, Jeffrey Stout likewise claims that we know certain moral truths such as the wrongness of slavery, even if these truths have not always been believed and even if we cannot justify them now in terms of some overarching moral theory.[9] Similarly, Martha Nussbaum has developed a widely influential defense of the universal validity of women's rights, grounded in their capabilities for certain kinds of functioning, which rests on a fundamental intuition and not on a prior theory: "The basic intuition from which the capability approach begins, in the political arena, is that certain human abilities exert a moral claim that they should be developed."[10] Neither Stout nor Nussbaum would describe him or herself as an intuitionist, and yet there are clear affinities between their approach and Little's intuitionism.

In contrast, other authors in this volume are less sanguine about the prospects for a common morality, and they also represent widely held

[6] Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action,* trans. Christine Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1990) 197–98.

[7] "Common Morality and Kant's Enlightenment Project," in *Prospects for a Common Morality* 53–72.

[8] "The Nature and Basis of Human Rights," in *Prospects for a Common Morality* 73–92.

[9] Stout offers the example of slavery in his *Ethics After Babel: The Languages of Morals and Their Discontents* (Boston: Beacon, 1988) 21–22 and passim. However, he makes the point that we may be justified in holding some moral beliefs that we cannot defend theoretically from "On Having a Morality in Common," in *Prospects for a Common Morality* 215–32, at 222–23.

[10] *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (New York: Cambridge University, 2000) 83.

positions.[11] Annette Baier offers a critique of most claims for universally valid human rights from the standpoint of a Humean virtue ethic, although she goes on to defend a more modest version of a human rights ethic. John Reeder argues that, even though we are never able to remove ourselves completely from the framework of some moral tradition or another, we can nonetheless work toward establishing transcultural moral claims through a process of reflection on the commonalities and areas of overlap of different traditions, an approach that he describes as "neo-pragmatism." Finally, Richard Rorty defends his well-known view that the moral claims of secular liberalism, including human rights, neither need nor can have any justification beyond the practices of certain late 20th-century communities. Rorty's approach, in turn, is similar to that of the widely influential theologian Stanley Hauerwas for whom Christian ethics is inextricably linked to the distinctive narratives and practices of the Christian community. For Hauerwas, any attempt to develop a universally valid ethic grounded in human nature will "inevitably result in a minimalist ethic and often one which gives support to forms of cultural imperialism."[12]

So far, we have been examining different perspectives on the prospects for a common morality including but not limited to a defense of human rights claims. Because the debate over human rights has immediate political and legal ramifications, it raises further issues. Many readers will be familiar with Alasdair MacIntyre's claim that beliefs in human rights are "one with belief in witches and in unicorns."[13] In his view, the idea of human rights was formulated in the modern period as a way of dealing with tensions internal to the Western moral tradition, and as such this idea is inextricably tied up with the specific values of that tradition. This is not just a theoretical argument. For the past several decades, representatives of non-Western countries have regularly criticized the language of human rights as a form of Western cultural hegemony.[14] This line of criticism has

[11] See Annette C. Baier, "Claims, Rights, Responsibilities" 149–69; John P. Reeder, "Foundations without Foundationalism," 191–214; and Richard Rorty, "The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy" and "Truth and Freedom: A Reply to Thomas McCarthy" in *Prospects for a Common Morality* 254–78 and 279–90.

[12] Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1983) 61.

[13] *After Virtue,* 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1984) 69; the argument cited is developed at 66–70.

[14] For helpful surveys and discussions of this critiques, see David Little, "Rethinking Human Rights: A Review Essay on Religion, Relativism, and Other Matters," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 27 (1999) 151–77 and, with reference specifically to African debates, Simeon O. Ilesanmi, "Civil-Political Rights or Social Economic Rights for Africa? A Comparative Ethical Critique of a False Dichotomy," *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* (1997) 191–212. Neither Little nor Ilesanmi endorses this critique. In addition, Radhika Coomaraswamy offers an illuminating

in its turn been critiqued as the disingenuous expression of cultural elites determined to maintain their ascendency.[15] Yet it would be a mistake to dismiss these arguments out of hand. There are deep differences among the cultural traditions of the world, particularly with respect to the nature of the individual and his or her proper relation to the community. The ideals of freedom from the community and independence with respect to the community do seem to be distinctively (not uniquely) Western. It is not always easy to see how Western concepts of human rights should apply in non-Western contexts.

This tension is particularly acute with respect to two issues, the rights of women and the right to religious freedom. In her contribution to *Prospects for a Common Morality,* Margaret Farley captures well the ambiguity that many feminists have felt over claims for a universal morality.[16] On the one hand, supposedly universal moralities have all too often reflected traditionally masculine values such as independence and a kind of dispassionate rationality. As a result, they have served to justify the view that women are less moral or responsible than men. On the other hand, if there are no universal moral standards, then we would seem to have no basis on which to critique cultural practices that are harmful or oppressive to women. Farley comes down on the side of a cautious moral universalism, since in her view there is no other fully satisfactory basis for feminism itself. At the same time she warns against the danger of idealizing the values of a dominant group.

The right to religious freedom has proven to be similarly contentious, at least in recent times. During the deliberations over the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, representatives of some Muslim nations raised objections to Article 18 of that Declaration, which affirms freedom of belief and the right to change one's religion, on the grounds that such rights are contrary to fundamental tenets of Islam. Similar objections have been raised by Muslims to later affirmations of the freedom of religion, including the 1981 United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion and Belief. This challenge presents an especially difficult set of questions for defenders of universally valid human rights, since Islam does seem to include central elements that are inconsistent with the supposedly

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analysis of conflicts between human rights norms and local traditions as they have emerged in recent incidents in India in "To Bellow Like a Cow: Women, Ethnicity, and the Discourse of Rights," in *Human Rights of Women: National and International Perspectives,* ed. Rebecca J. Cook (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1994) 39–57.

[15] See Martha Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development* 38 ff.

[16] "Feminism and Universal Morality," in *Prospects for a Common Morality* 170–90.

universal right to religious freedom. Yet even at this point, the conflict between universalism and local traditions is not as stark as it might seem to be at first. As David Little, Abdulaziz Sachedina, and John Kelsay argue, there are countervailing traditions within Islam itself that support the right to religious freedom, and these can serve as starting points for negotiations between representatives of Muslim societies and defenders of a right to religious freedom.[17]

This brings us to a more general point. That is, it is easy to assume that the project of establishing universally recognized human rights stands or falls on the question of common morality; if there is no rationally compelling morality that is binding on all persons, then it would seem that we have no basis for rights claims that are binding on all, whatever the specifics of their local traditions. Yet these are not the only alternatives. In "Moral Grounds and Plural Cultures: Interpreting Human Rights in the International Community," Sumner B. Twiss offers a third alternative, a strategy of pragmatic negotiation that builds on areas of overlapping consensus to develop human rights claims that can be defended from within the perspectives of a wide range of traditions.[18] In other words, he advocates something very similar to the procedure offered by Little, Sachedina, and Kelsay for negotiating conflicts over religious freedom. Twiss's proposal is also similar to that offered by John Reeder in his essay in *Prospects for a Common Morality* and has points of contact with the positions developed in that volume by Stout and Rorty (although neither Twiss nor Little, and probably not Stout, would endorse Rorty's full-fledged relativism).

William O'Neill has recently begun to develop a particularly promising approach to the justification of human rights along these lines. While O'Neill admits that human rights cannot be derived from a purely rational common morality, he nonetheless denies that we are forced into a "Hobson's choice between a formal, universal metanarrative and the local, ethnocentric narrative of the western bourgeoisie."[19] Instead, he claims that rights "are best viewed rhetorically, that is, as liming the possibility of rationally persuasive argument across our varied narrative traditions."[20]

[17] "Human Rights and the World's Religions: Christianity, Islam, and Religious Liberty," in *Religious Diversity and Human Rights* 213–39; I take the information for this paragraph from this essay.

[18] Sumner B. Twiss, "Moral Grounds and Plural Cultures"; for the references to Reeder, Stout and Rorty, see n. 10 and n. 12 above. Twiss appeals to Reeder's essay at 279.

[19] William O'Neill, "Babel's Children: Reconstructing the Common Good," *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* (1998) 161–76, at 164. In addition, see his "Ethics and Inculturation: The Scope and Limits of Rights Discourse," *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* (1993) 73–92.

[20] Ibid.

O'Neill's appeal to rhetorical persuasion as a way of developing human rights claims might suggest that what he has in mind is simply a strategy of ad hoc persuasion, enticing others to play with us the language game of human rights. But that is not his intent. He speaks in terms of rhetorical persuasion because rhetoric, correctly understood, is the art of persuading others in terms of reasons that they themselves would find persuasive. Hence, it presupposes a willingness to enter into the point of view of one's interlocutor, in order to appreciate what she or he would consider to be a persuasive consideration. This implies an openness to the transformation of one's own perspectives, and this openness in turn guarantees that this process will not degenerate into manipulation. Even more importantly, it offers a way to build up human rights practices that are both widely accepted and practically effective, because they stem from lived moral traditions as these are applied in actual contexts.

In addition to questions of justification, discussions of human rights have also raised a question of interpretation. What does it mean to have a right, and how are different kinds of rights claims to be weighed against each other? While this question arises in many contexts, it is especially relevant to debates over the existence of positive rights, that is to say, entitlements to the necessary means of subsistence or to positive aid in situations of distress. As David Hollenbach has long argued, the Catholic social justice tradition is especially congenial to such a view, and in fact we would have to deny some of our most important commitments if we denied the existence of any form of positive rights.[21] However, such claims are not unproblematic. We are accustomed to think of rights claims as indefeasible, or very nearly so; that is, they are binding on other persons and on society, whatever the specific circumstances in which they are lodged. This presumption would need to be qualified a great deal, but it is apparent that it is more plausible as applied to negative in contrast to positive rights. In saying this, I do not mean to imply that there are no prospects at all for developing a doctrine of positive rights. Yet it is undeniably the case that claims to positive rights raise complex theoretical and practical difficulties.

Recently, Simeon Ilesanmi has examined these issues in a series of articles discussing positive and negative rights claims in an African context.[22]

[21] David Hollenbach, *Claims in Conflict: Retrieving and Renewing the Catholic Human Rights Tradition* (New York: Paulist, 1979) 41–106, and more recently, "Solidarity, Development, and Human Rights," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 26 (1998) 305–19. The latter article focuses on human rights in an African context and therefore can usefully be read in conjunction with Ilesanmi's articles cited below.

[22] "Civil-Political Rights or Social Economic Rights for Africa?" and earlier, "Human Rights Discourse in Modern Africa: A Comparative Religious Ethical Perspective," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 23 (1995) 293–322. I rely primarily on the 1997 article.

These articles are particularly valuable because they demonstrate that questions pertaining to the justification of rights and to their interpretation cannot be neatly separated from one another. Ilesanmi observes that many African philosophers and political activists object to the Western focus on negative rights on the grounds that such rights are meaningless, or even counterproductive, in circumstances in which persons lack the basic necessities of life. This is of course a familiar line of argument. However, as Ilesanmi goes on to show, it is buttressed and developed through a second, more distinctive claim that African conceptions of person and society lend themselves more readily to a positive conception of rights. Some have argued further that within this context, rights are best ascribed to the community rather than to individuals, a claim that is difficult to reconcile with the Western emphasis on rights as a protection for the individual over against the community.

Ilesanmi is sympathetic to these claims, but he is also convinced that a conception of negative, individual rights embodied in political liberties is also valid and important within an African context. Unless this is acknowledged, he fears, the endorsement of positive rights as somehow more in accordance with African traditions can serve as a pretext for disregarding any sort of rights claims. Hence, Ilesanmi proposes a model of human rights that stresses the interconnections and mutually reinforcing character of positive and negative rights, grounded ultimately in an African vision of persons as interdependent with one another. Only in this way, he claims, can we hope to safeguard development and sufficiency as well as personal freedom and well-being in an African context.

RECENT CONTRIBUTIONS FROM CATHOLIC SCHOLARS

As is clear from what has already been noted here, Catholic scholars have been at the forefront of discussions of common morality, human rights, and related issues. In this section, I examine in more detail two recent contributions by a leading Catholic theologian.

Hans Küng's *Global Responsibility,* is, as might be expected, an explicitly theological reflection on the prospects for developing a common morality.[23] This book reflects Küng's long-standing participation in interreligious dialogue, not only through his research and writing, but also through active engagement with representatives from other traditions. Küng's record of active and outspoken involvement in interreligious dialogue, in turn, led to the production of a second work on global ethics, the "Declaration Toward

[23] *Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethic* (New York: Continuum, 1996).

a Global Ethic" passed by the Parliament of the World's Religions during its meeting in Chicago, August 28–September 4, 1993.[24]

What is the Parliament of the World's Religions? As Küng's colleague Karl-Josef Kuschel explains in his commentary on the Declaration, the first Parliament was convened by a committee of Chicago businessmen, pastors, and teachers to coincide with the 1893 World Columbian Exposition in Chicago.[25] It was conceived as an association of representatives from the world's leading religious traditions, chosen from the grass roots membership rather than from the ranks of official church leaders, in which each person would stand on a footing of equality with all the others. These ideals also governed the second Parliament, convened to celebrate the centenary of the first, while at the same time the conveners broadened the membership to include a wider range of representatives from Eastern, indigenous, and alternative religious traditions. Of course, not every religious tradition was represented in this Parliament. Nonetheless, it included representatives from over 115 different religious organizations among more than 6,500 delegates.

As Küng explains in his own essay accompanying this Declaration, he was approached by the planners of the second Parliament of the World's Religions to draft a statement of a common ethic that could be endorsed by the Parliament, and after some initial hesitation, he agreed to do so.[26] The draft statement he eventually offered to the Parliament was the fruit of a long process of collaboration and consultation with others, but for that very reason, it was not opened to amendment by the Parliament itself. After considerable controversy, and after it was designated an "Initial Document Towards a Global Ethic," it was passed by an overwhelming majority of delegates just before the end of the Parliament on September 4, 1993.

As Küng explains, the aim of this document is to provide a statement of the minimal ethical consensus shared by all the world's religions. As such, it is necessarily general, non-partisan, and non-doctrinal.[27] It may be asked why such a general statement is needed or useful. Küng's reply is indicated by his observation in *Global Responsibility* that "without morality, without universally binding ethical norms, indeed without 'global standards,' the nations are in danger of maneuvering themselves into a crisis which can

[24] *A Global Ethic: The Declaration of the Parliament of the World's Religions,* with commentaries by Hans Küng and Karl-Josef Kuschel (New York: Continuum, 1998) 11–40.

[25] "The Parliament of the World's Religions, 1893–1993," in *A Global Ethic* 77–105.

[26] "The History, Significance, and Method of the Declaration Toward a Global Ethic," in ibid. 43–76.

[27] Ibid. 55–57.

ultimately lead to national collapse, i.e. to economic ruin, social disintegration and political catastrophe."[28]

The Declaration begins by affirming that there can be no new global order without a new global ethic, which can provide a basis for "a vision of peoples living peacefully together."[29] This ethic takes its starting point from what it describes as a "fundamental demand," namely, that "every human being must be treated humanely."[30] This, in turn, is spelled out in four fundamental and irrevocable norms: "Commitment to a culture of non-violence and respect for life; commitment to a culture of solidarity and a just economic order; commitment to a culture of tolerance and a life of truthfulness; commitment to a culture of equal rights and partnership between men and women."[31] The document concludes by calling for "A transformation of consciousness," on the basis of which men and women can work together to determine the practical meaning of these principles.[32]

Küng's *Global Responsibility* anticipates the basic ideals and principles which we find contained in the Declaration, although of course not in exactly the same form. In this book, however, he also addresses basic theological and foundational questions that would have been out of place in the Declaration. In particular, he takes up the question of why it is that we need a religious ethic as a basis for a new global order. It is easy enough to understand why we would want to find a basis for consensus among believers in different religions, if only to reduce the possibilities of religious conflict; but is there anything of positive value in a religious perspective on common morality, which cannot be supplied by a universal secular morality?

Küng believes that there is. "Let us be quite clear," he writes, "even those who have no religion can also lead a life which is authentically human and in this sense moral: this is the expression of human autonomy within the world. But there is one thing that those who have no religion cannot do, even if in fact they want to accept unconditional moral norms for themselves: they cannot give a reason for the absoluteness and universality of ethical obligation."[33]

And why not? As he goes on to explain, "An unconditional claim, a 'categorical ought,' cannot be derived from the finite conditions of human existence, from human urgencies and needs."[34] For this reason, religion has an indispensable role to play in the moral life, disclosing a depth dimension

[28] Ibid. 26.

[29] "Declaration Toward a Global Ethic" 19.

[30] Ibid. 21.

[31] These are quoted from "Declaration Toward a Global Ethic" (24–34) which also includes explanation and commentary on each norm.

[32] Ibid. 34–36.

[33] *Global Responsibility* 51.

[34] Ibid. 52.

that gives meaning to life even in the face of suffering and death, and guaranteeing "supreme values, unconditional norms, the deepest motivations and the highest ideals."[35] In this way, religion provides a warrant for ethical obligation, even in those situations in which individual or social expediency might urge us to adopt another course of action.

What are we to make of this? It is refreshing to see a robustly theological defense of the need for, and the possibilities of a common morality. Furthermore, Küng speaks with the authority of someone who has tested his ideas in dialogue with representatives of other traditions. In my last section, it was noted that a number of authors have recently explored the possibilities of pragmatic negotiation as a way of overcoming differences of perspective. Küng has actually engaged in such a process, although he might prefer to speak of it as a process of discernment through which the common ethical core of the world's religions is brought to light.

In reading through the actual principles that Küng identifies in *Global Responsibility* or the norms contained in the Declaration, one might be tempted to repeat Annette Baier's judgment on most human rights documents: "Lists of universal rights, if they are both to cohere and to receive anything like general assent, must be so vague as to be virtually empty."[36] In fact, Küng himself comments that while the principles he identifies as fundamental to a global ethic are good, "some will object that they are still far too general. And without doubt, they can be made concrete."[37] Yet it would be a mistake to dismiss as sheer platitudes the principles enunciated by Küng in his earlier book or in the Declaration. Even if these principles were completely noncontroversial, there would still be some value in articulating them, if only to underscore the importance of the commitments in question and to give salience to the practical concerns they generate.

In fact, the norms and commitments stated in the Declaration did generate controversy. As Kuschel observes, some delegates raised questions about "the equal place given to men and women, the question of nonviolence, and the character of the document as a whole, which was thought to be 'too Western.' "[38] At the same time, the principles enunciated in *Global Responsibility* and the Declaration would need a great deal of specification in view of concrete circumstances in order to be practically meaningful. Küng realizes this, although he does not say much about the difficulties that such a process would involve. Of course, the further we move in the direction of specifying the meaning of these general principles,

[35] Ibid. 54.

[36] "Claims, Rights, Responsibilities," in *Prospects for a Common Morality* 149–69, at 152.

[37] *Global Responsibility* 63.

[38] "The Parliament of the World's Religions, 1893–1993" 96.

the more specific religious differences would come into play. It is relatively easy to secure agreement that we should work toward a culture of equal partnership between men and women, for example, even though as we have noted this claim was not universally accepted. But once we ask what specifically this means, consensus is still more difficult to attain. To take only one example, does the freedom and equality of women require access to contraceptives and abortion? The official teachings of the Catholic Church with which many Catholics would concur would lead to an emphatic negative answer to this question; yet a number of other Catholics would argue to the contrary that it does.[39] If we cannot arrive at consensus on such basic and important matters as contraception and abortion within Catholicism, we can hardly expect to reach extensive agreement on concrete social practices anytime soon among representatives of the world religions.

A more fundamental difficulty with Küng's position lies in his claim that only religion can provide the basis for an absolute and unconditional moral obligation. It has long been a truism among moral philosophers that the distinctive mark of a moral consideration, as opposed to a prudential or hedonistic reason for action, lies in its unconditional and overriding character. Over the past two centuries, philosophers have spent considerable efforts to account for and to defend this aspect of moral obligation on nontheistic grounds. Kant's appeal to the idea of a self-authenticating imperative of practical reason is probably the best known, although certainly not the only such effort. It may well be that none of these efforts is successful, but they deserve to be taken seriously, and Küng does not even advert to them.

By the same token, it is not at all clear that Küng's own efforts to place morality on a secure foundation are more successful than the best philosophical alternatives. Küng asserts that the absoluteness of moral obligation presupposes and is guaranteed by the absoluteness of a transcendental divine reality, but this is hardly an argument. Too much remains to be spelled out concerning the meaning of "absolute" and the relation between God's character as the Absolute (absolute what?) and the unconditional character of moral demands.[40] Matters are further complicated by the fact that Küng himself goes on to qualify the absolute character of moral norms:

> For norms without the situation are empty, and the situation without a norm is blind. Rather, norms should illuminate the situation, and the situation should gov-

[39] For a good summary of this view, see the commentary by Catholics for a Free Choice on the Fourth World Conference on Women which met in 1995 in Beijing, China, "Catholic Voices on Beijing: A Call for Social Justice for Women" (Washington: Catholics for a Free Choice, 2000) 12–13.

[40] Küng uses this language in *Global Responsibility* 53.

ern the norms. Certainly what is moral is not just what is good or right in the abstract but what is good or right in the specific instance: what is appropriate. In other words, obligation becomes specific only in the particular situation. But in a particular situation, which of course can be identified only by the person involved, the obligation can become unconditional.[41]

In other words, moral norms must be applied to particular situations in order to have practical force. The absoluteness of moral obligation amounts to this, that I am absolutely obliged to do whatever it is, all things being considered, that I ought to do in a given situation. This is certainly a defensible line of interpretation, but it is significantly different from what is usually meant by the absoluteness of moral obligation, which is normally thought to imply the exceptionless character and overriding force of at least some general moral rules.

To a considerable degree, Küng's interpretation of morality and its relation to religion presupposes a very general account of religion as well as morality. Indeed, this generality reflects a deliberate strategy, since as Küng points out, we are more likely to progress in interreligious dialogue if we emphasize what we have in common with our interlocutors, and de-emphasize our differences. Hence, the generality of Küng's account of religion can be seen as forming part of a practical strategy for dealing with religious interlocutors of very different views, and seen in this way, it clearly has much to commend it. If we are to work together, it helps to find some common ground in shared beliefs.

Yet it is not clear that this is the only, or even the best strategy, for interreligious moral dialogue. In the last section, we saw that a number of scholars are advocating another approach, one which begins by looking for specific points of agreement and working toward a consensus, perhaps only limited and provisional but still workable on that basis. If this strategy is successful—and it seems to be, at least in some cases—it is not so clear that we do need a global ethic, with or without religious foundations, to resolve moral conflicts across national boundaries. It may be enough to bring an attitude of openness and a willingness to look for a basis for ad hoc agreement to situations of potential conflict.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MORAL THEOLOGY

In the course of developing ecumenical criteria for truth, Küng remarks that "religion has always proved most convincing where it has succeeded—long before any modern attempts at autonomy—in effectively establishing what is truly human, the *humanum*, against the horizon of the

[41] Ibid. 57.

Absolute . . ."[42] The idea of the *humanum*, the ideal or fully developed human existence, has long been a staple of Catholic moral theology. In the writings of Joseph Fuchs and others, it served to justify the claim that there is no distinctively Christian ethic, at least with respect to central moral content; more recently, we find Thomas Kopfensteiner exploring the possibilities of a similar idea as a way of developing a Christological foundation for morality.[43] It is not surprising, therefore, to find Küng appealing across national boundaries to the *humanum* as a basis for a common morality.

Yet one effect of recent encounters between Western Christians and representatives of other moral traditions has been to call into question the very idea of the "truly human," where this is interpreted as a universally valid idea of human existence that yields a universal morality. While all men and women do seem to share certain basic needs and inclinations, it is far from clear that these commonalities are sufficient to generate a universally valid ideal of human existence. As we have just noted, any statement of ethical principles that might plausibly claim universal validity will also perforce be highly general, and even a quite general statement of principles has the potential to be controversial. Moreover, as the philosopher John Keckes observes, even if we are justified of speaking in terms of a universal human nature that has moral implications, this nature underdetermines morality; that is to say, the commonalities of human nature are consistent with substantially different moral codes.[44]

The limitations of a concept of the "truly human" as a religious ideal are most apparent when we compare the great traditions of the world with respect to their ideals of human flourishing. As Lee Yearley points out, when we do so, we encounter ideals that are not only very different from our own, but ultimately incompatible:

> The most revealing examples of this inability to shop occur in those painfully illuminating moments when you deeply appreciate something you know is an unacceptable option for you and will not, you hope, become an option for those you

[42] Ibid. 86.

[43] See Joseph Fuchs, "Is There a Specifically Christian Morality?", originally published as "Gibt es eine spezifisch christliche Moral?" *Stimmen der Zeit* 185 (1970), reprinted in English in Charles E. Curran and Richard A. McCormick, S.J., *Readings in Moral Theology, No. 2: The Distinctiveness of Christian Ethics* (New York: Paulist, 1980) 3–19; and Thomas R. Kopfensteiner, "Globalization and the Autonomy of Moral Reasoning: An Essay in Fundamental Moral Theology" *TS* 54 (1993) 485–511. However, Kopfensteiner focuses on Jesus as instantiating an ideal of freedom for the Christian rather than the *humanum* as such.

[44] John Kekes, "Human Nature and Moral Theories," *Inquiry* 28 (1985) 231–45. As we have seen, Reeder, probably Twiss and O'Neill, and possibly Baier and Stout, would also endorse this view, which is widely held today.

love most. Examples are many, especially if one studies either other cultures or Western history. Some strike especially close to home: Mencius's refusal to greet a bereaved person in order to honor ritual [li]; Aquinas's defenses of virginity; Chuang Tzu's powerful notion of compassion, which leads him to overlook evident wrongdoing. Others are more distant and yet they still bite: Confucius's validation for the heroism evident in a gamekeeper's refusal, at risk of death, to answer an improper summons so that proper rank and relations may be protected; the way that Indian villagers, responding to their sense of social and even cosmic harmony, find more objectionable a widow who eats fish three times a week than a doctor who refuses to treat a sick patient because that patient is poor.[45]

I have quoted Yearley at some length because he vividly expresses what is too often lacking in theological invocations of the ideal of the *humanum*, namely, a sense of the profound differences that exist among ideals of human existence among the world's different traditions. Is there any meaning or point to speaking of the truly human in the face of such profound differences? At any rate, if we do defend a specific ideal of the truly human, we must face the likelihood that such an ideal will not be shared by many intelligent and deeply spiritual persons, those whose traditions and cultural practices are different from our own. It would perhaps be better to follow Yearley's advice to cultivate virtues of humility and spiritual regret in the face of spiritual ideals that we cannot share, or perhaps even fully understand.[46]

At the same time, even if we surrender the idea of the truly human, at least as a moral ideal, that does not mean that we will be forced to give up any hope of developing a workable moral consensus among the peoples of the world. On the contrary, the experiences of the past half century illustrate that it is possible to develop a very considerable degree of practical consensus through the processes of pragmatic negotiation I have been describing. The very success of these processes does at least suggest that there are significant commonalities in human existence that make cross-cultural moral consensus a real possibility. We cannot take such a consensus as a given, bestowed on us by a universal morality, but that does not mean that we have to despair of developing it.

All too often, discussions of the prospects for a common morality frame the issue in terms of unnecessarily stark alternatives. Either we can establish a universal morality, binding on all persons, or we will fall back into a sheer moral relativism; either we can base morality on the givens of human nature or practical reason, or morality is a construct all the way down. But these alternatives are too simplistic. It is possible to hold that constant features of human existence shape the development of morality to some

[45] Lee Yearley, "Conflicts Among Ideals of Human Flourishing," in *Prospects for a Common Morality* 233–53, at 246.

[46] Ibid. 244–48.

degree, while still arguing that fully developed moral codes are social constructs. In other words, it may be that morality is a social construct, but a construct that stems from and draws upon species specific aspects of our human nature. Correlatively, the belief that there are certain characteristically human needs and inclinations is consistent with the acknowledgment of deep, possibly even intractable disagreements among different moral traditions, since on this view, human nature, while real and morally significant, nonetheless under determines morality.

As may be apparent by now, this is the approach that I advocate. The claim that all moral traditions share a fundamental core, which amounts to a universally valid morality, appears to me to be defensible only if the core in question is described at such a high level of generality as to be virtually empty, and even then, it is difficult to arrive at a statement of principles that would be universally accepted. (Witness the controversies generated by the seemingly platitudinous commitments of the "Declaration Toward a Global Ethic.") Yet this does not mean that genuine, noncoercive conversation and even consensus among representatives of different traditions is impossible. It does mean that we need to approach moral dialogue with due humility and relatively modest goals. We may not arrive at a universal ethic, but then we probably do not need a universal ethic in order to develop a basis for a workable moral consensus on a wide range of issues.

Of course, such an approach leaves unaddressed many questions about the theological significance of morality. Christian theologians, not only Catholics, have long assumed that fundamental Christian beliefs about creation and the Incarnation commit us to a robust form of moral realism. I would agree that these doctrines do commit us to some form of moral realism, but it is not clear that it needs to take the form of a universal ethic offering concrete and comprehensive rules that can be grasped by all rational persons. We can acknowledge that morality is ideally grounded in and reflective of God's wisdom and love as expressed in creation, while still allowing considerable scope for human agency in the formulation of moral norms. The claim that Christ reflects an ideal of human existence need not be spelled out in moral terms, and, at any rate, it is perhaps time to reexamine the broader Christological implications of this claim. At any rate, it would take us too far afield to address these questions, or even to attempt to formulate them in greater detail, at this point.[47]

[47] My thanks to Ms. Emily Arndt for her assistance with the bibliographical research. I wish to acknowledge support from the Institute for Studies in the Liberal Arts, the College of Arts and Letters, the University of Notre Dame, which provided me with a grant for the period during which this moral note was written.