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Christian Ethics

Esther D. Reed, Dion Forster and Rudolf von Sinner with Ernst M. Conradie, Jörg Haustein, Daniel Heide, Ángel F. Méndez-Montoya and Upolu Lumā Vaai

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Christian Ethics

Esther D. Reed, Dion Forster, and Rudolf von Sinner with Ernst M. Conradie, Jörg Haustein, Daniel Heide, Ángel F. Méndez-Montoya, and Upolu Lumā Vaai

Contributed by scholars from diverse traditions and perspectives around the world, this article evidences both unifying and diversifying impulses in Christian ethics and moral thinking. Christian ethics is understood as both lived experience and academic study reflecting upon practice, deploying moral norms, engaging present-day issues, and more. Major topics include climate change, the body, peacemaking, and more. Consideration is also paid to the powerful the role of the Bible in the everyday lives and decision-making of Christian people. Persistent emphases include God's bias to the poor and how God's gift of the earth to all in common requires human beings to ensure that those things necessary for life are available to all, including future generations. Christian ethics is shown to be distinctive because it follows from belief in Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God, and capable of argumentation without direct reference to revelation. Together, and in a conscious effort to reflect the polyphony of Pentecost (Acts 2:4–6), the contributors find Christian ethics to be an academic discipline of both sorrow and hope.

Keywords: Ethics, Christian theology, Bible, Climate change, Body, Peacemaking

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1 Introduction: what is Christian ethics?

Christian ethics may be understood in at least two ways:

(1) Faith seeking practical wisdom, i.e. the lived experience of Christian people seeking the grace of God to embody resurrection good news in their life together, public witness, and engagement.
(2) Academic study of this lived experience.

As lived experience, Christian ethics is the day-to-day walk of discipleship . This article gives conceptual priority to Christian ethics as lived experience. It pays particular attention to the diverse history/ies of experience, with awareness of geographical reach and contextual specificity, socioeconomic inequalities, ethnic and sex/gender diversity, and embodied experiences, and with priority always accorded to the poorest and most vulnerable. A particular contemporary challenge is to engage the diversity of Christian ethics as lived experience, especially the perspectives of historically marginalized peoples, cultures, and identities, and those most vulnerable to the effects of climate change, poverty, and conflict. This is because epistemic injustice occurs when knowledge of history/ies systemically excludes, silences, distorts, or misrepresents perspectives or contributions.

The academic study of Christian ethics demands no faith commitment. Nor does the lived experience of Christians making ethical decisions demand academic study. Nevertheless, symbioses between these diverse perspectives can be illuminating.

2 How is Christian ethics done?

There are broadly four ways in which Christian ethics can be done:

(1) *Historically*: Christian ethics done historically demands descriptive, analytic, and otherwise evidentially-informed approaches in response to questions about what happened in the past. Historical approach to Christian ethics might be focused on geographical regions, the inseparability of much Christian history with military and economic power, cultural changes, or the history of ideas.
(2) *Theologico-practically*: Christian ethics done theologico-practically involves interpretive and normative approaches that variously investigate what Christians believe, and how belief drives and/or should direct action in particular contexts and situations.
(3) *Socio-anthropologically*: Christian ethics done socio-anthropologically involves descriptive, analytic, and evidentially informed approaches that focus on how Christians live and interrelate, and what makes their lives meaningful and distinctive.

(4) *Philosophically*: Christian ethics done philosophically means that theorists use analytic and reflective approaches to expose the many other dimension(s) of Christian ethics, including doctrine, to questions of logical coherence, rigor of argumentation, and comparison with other philosophies and worldviews.

These four broad approaches frequently intermingle and are not exhaustive. Openness to methodological diversity and cross-fertilization is needed in response to the complexity of the issues typically involved. All approaches are challenged to be undertaken polyphonically, that is, bearing witness prophetically to the power of the Holy Spirit to enable many voices and mutual understanding (Acts 2:4). How to meet this challenge – with critical reflection on one's own context, positionality, and inseparability from the complex histories of formerly-colonizing and formerly-colonized countries, and socially-conditioned if perhaps unconscious biases and prejudice (among other things) – is an open question across contemporary Christian ethics (Katongole 2011; Maldonaldo-Torres 2014).

2.1 Historically

Christian ethics, approached historically, has been dominated by the story of Western, originally Latin-speaking churches, Roman Catholicism, and the various branches of Protestantism, to the exclusion of the many and various traditions of Eastern Christianity in the Middle East, Egypt, parts of Africa, Asia Minor, the far East, and elsewhere. As it has traditionally been centred on Western loci of power, a challenge for contemporary Christian ethics, approached historically (i.e. using historical methodologies), is a more inclusive recovery of the ethos/ethics of the many Orthodox churches – Eastern (Chalcedonian) and Oriental Orthodox (non-Chalcedonian) – and, indeed, of believers and ecclesial communities in all localities and regions of the world (Joy and Duggan 2012: xiii; Spivak 1988: 271–314). Achieving this inclusivity in historically-approached Christian ethics is a challenge sought out by students and researchers who attempt to de-Westernize the curriculum and include voices from Latin America and the Caribbean, Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and elsewhere (Kwok Pui-Lan 2021; Nakashima Brock and Liew 2021; Maldonaldo-Torres 2014; Moraña, Dussel and Jáuregui 2008; Sugirtharajah 2003).

2.2 Theologico-practically

The distinction between theory and practice should not be overdrawn: 'Theory is a practice, and practice always assumes theory' (Long and Miles 2023: 1). As liberation theologians have taught since the 1960s, theory and practice are each at their best when mutually informing one another (Sobrino 1988; Bonino 1983; Gutiérrez 1973: 25). Sometimes described as 'theology in action', Christian ethics is the challenge of understanding what it means to live oriented to God's future when the whole earth will be 'full of his glory' (Isa 6:3; Rom 8:18–25; Rev 21:1); to seek to acquire the mind of

Christ (1 Cor 2:16); and to embody the gospel in a social ethic (Matt 11:4–6). As faith seeking practical wisdom, Christian ethics is theology in action or *performative* knowledge, wherein, for instance, beliefs about the goodness of God (orthodoxy) find expression in right action (orthopraxis; Ward 2005: 170), as the Bible, church teaching, etc. are interpreted in the light of experience.

In 1968, the Medellín statement by the Conference of Latin American Bishops spoke of the love known by the light of Christ as both 'the fundamental law of human perfection' and also 'the dynamism which ought to motivate Christians to realize justice in the world' (Bishops of Latin America 1968). Making practical sense of the gospel imperative of love in the hermeneutic cycle that moves between orthodoxy and orthopraxis is an unending work of interpretation. Christian ethics is more adequate than an exclusively deductive processes of reasoning that runs from a 'universal' or major premise (which identifies a general rule) and a 'particular' or minor premise (which identifies specific details about the matter at hand) in order to reach a conclusion. Instead of this, Christian ethics, as faith seeking practical wisdom, reads biblical texts, creedal statements, etc. *and* the societies, cultures, and particular situations in which faith is lived. To approach Christian ethics theologically and practically is always to think about the relation between doctrinal beliefs, human attitudes, and action.

2.3 Socio-anthropologically

Christian discipleship is a lived experience (McGuire 2008; Ammerman 2006). For example, many Christians meet together for worship and fellowship – albeit in diverse ways. They often sing and pray together, celebrate the liturgy, eat together, and serve the local community. Approaching Christian ethics socio-anthropologically is an attempt to understand how the basic activities of worship and fellowship, etc. are modes of being or life-orientation that set a pattern for everyday living (Guroian 1985). Christian ethics approached socio-anthropologically is a way of appreciating the dynamic relationships between worship – i.e. showing reverence, bowing down, and/or prostrating oneself before God (Hebrew *saḥa*; Greek *proskynéō*) in thanksgiving or supplication – and day-to-day living and decision-making. In worship, the affective dimension of knowing, i.e. knowing as we love, is centred on God. Using socio-anthropological tools to inquire further into this lived experience might help in ethics, for instance, to see why and how a Christian understanding of creaturely relatedness – before God – to the entire created order can assist in providing moral foundations to address the environmental crisis. The values and virtues learned in worship prohibit abuse of the natural order and demand care for our 'common home' (Pope Francis 2020b: section 1).

2.4 Philosophically

Approached philosophically, Christian ethics prioritizes questions about the precision, conceptual coherence, and logical rigour of claims made about good and evil, the relationship between divine and human justice, how practical reasoning arrives at judgment about what to do, and more. It is 'attuned to the deployment of the skills, resources, and virtues of analytic philosophy'; the articulation of the central themes of Christian ethical teaching illuminated by the best insights of analytic philosophy (Abraham 2009: 54). Christian ethics cannot be reduced to propositions with respect to values, good, principles, obligations, rules, etc. but all of these play a role in responsible and accountable decision-making.

As casuistry (that is, when dealing with cases of conscience), Christian ethics in philosophical mode often draws conclusions deductively from practical syllogisms, and/or reasons inductively towards conclusions. Thomas Aquinas, for example, engaged difficult cases by using a form of deductive reasoning wherein a conclusion is drawn from two given (or more assumed) premises. His letter to James of Viterbo attended carefully to the specifics of the situations and the perplexity in dispute – here cases of fraudulent payments, delays in payment, and what constitutes usury (Aquinas 1960). Creation in the image of God (*imago Dei*) means, for Aquinas, that human beings are creatures of God, free to make choices and open to the possibilities of both good and evil:

> Since, as Damascene states [*De Fide Orthod*. ii. 12], man is said to be made to God's image, in so far as the image implies an intelligent being endowed with free-will and self-movement: now that we have treated of the exemplar, i.e. God, and of those things which came forth from the power of God in accordance with His will; it remains for us to treat of His image, i.e. man, inasmuch as he too is the principle of his actions, as having free-will and control of his actions. (Summa Theologiae [ST] I–II: Prologue; Aquinas 1981)

The quest is for practical reasoning capable of discerning the good in every circumstance and choosing the right means of achieving it. Aquinas' guidance includes the following specification of the conditions required:

> First, to order that which is befitting the end, and this belongs to 'foresight'; secondly, to attend to the circumstances of the matter in hand, and this belongs to 'circumspection'; thirdly, to avoid obstacles, and this belongs to 'caution'. (ST II-II, q.48, a.1, c; Aquinas 1981)

In subsequent centuries, some casuists developed different techniques, e.g. identifying paradigm cases and/or paying more attention to the character and aspirations of the reasoner (Sedgwick 2018). Casuistry came to have a bad reputation in Christian history because of its association with clever but false reasoning that could degenerate into finding an apparently moral reason for doing what was desired in the first place. Casuistry can be done in responsible and biblically-encountering ways, however, and remains

needful as Christian ethics in philosophical mode seeks practical understanding in the service of decision-making.

3 How might the role of the Bible in Christian ethics be understood?

More than a collection of ancient texts, the Bible is the means by which disciples of Christ Jesus find their place in salvation history, and learn of the triune God's purposes for the cosmos that was created entirely good (Bartholomew 2004: 161). It is not a book of straightforward answers to ethical questions. The question of the role of the Bible in Christian ethics attracts diverse answers, but three broad hermeneutical guidelines may be followed.

3.1 Reading the whole Bible

As a collection of ancient texts, the Bible does not yield a single coherent moral vision; rather, a polyphony of voices speak. Hence the wisdom of reading the whole Bible. In ecclesial contexts, this is typically achieved by reading liturgically, i.e. by following the sequences laid down in lectionaries. Statements, sometimes difficult to hear and understand, are encountered in contexts of worship by the people seeking for moral meaning in the word of God. Diverse witness to the identity and character of God is experienced as an everyday occurrence – 'the Mighty One of Jacob' (Gen 49:24); 'I am that I am' (Exod 3:14); like a bird protecting its young or a rock-solid wall (Ps 91:4–6); a punisher of injustice (Mic 6:18); a compassionate and faithful father (Mark 14:36). Reading the whole Bible ensures that its entire moral vision, rather than a selective choice, is experienced, with implications for review and critique in how a Christian ethos is shaped.

3.2 Reading narratively

As texts telling of God's care of creation through the calling of Israel, the life of Jesus, the sending of the Holy Spirit, and more, the role of the Bible in Christian ethics may be understood by reading narratively, i.e. as recounting the story of what God has done and is doing in the world. Stanley Hauerwas, for instance, has emphasized that the church as a community of faith depends for its existence upon memory (the remembering and retelling of the story of salvation) rather than nature or reason (Hauerwas 1981); its ethic (Latin ethos: 'character', 'custom') is (re-)discovered as the community continuously remembers and reinterprets this story. The task of Christian ethics is then to seek and reflect on the moral sense of the Bible, even as it allows a diversity of witness to the self-revealing grace of the triune God to bear upon daily living. Telling this story in systematic form (e.g. through orderly doctrine accounts) does not replace the 'messiness' of biblical stories but invites continuous return to the gospel of God's love, faithfulness, justice, and mercy, to Jesus'

words and deeds, and to the Bible's full spectrum of discrete histories (Conradie 2015; Ritschl 2012).

3.3 Reading with suspicion

Tragically, the Bible has been used time and again to exclude, oppress, marginalize, and side-line minority or powerless groups: 'The Bible is open to abuse by the powerful' (Farisani 2014). How the Bible was used both to support apartheid in South Africa and in the struggle against it is a case in point (Smit 2007). Advocates of apartheid used scripture to justify their ideology (Maimela 1997). Certain biblical interpretations have relegated women to a particular social status (Ruether 1983) and justified gender discrimination (Althaus-Reid 2004). A 'hermeneutics of suspicion' is needed (Schüssler-Fiorenza 1994; Faith and Order Commission 1998; Bouteneff and Heller 2001) to expose the extent to which the authority of the Bible can be undermined, eroded, and even hijacked, and to excise biblically rooted ideological justification of racial, sexist, and other oppression. The challenge to discern between the 'spirit of the age', the human spirit, and the Holy Spirit is unceasing, but is assisted by prioritizing grassroots groups, and by celebrating ethnic and cultural diversity and the perspectives of the poor, womanist, queer, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender/transsexual voices (Loughlin 2007). For the hermeneutic of suspicion, feminist, ecological, postcolonial, and decolonial readings of the Bible (West 2016; Dube and West 2001) are especially important.

3.4 Reading as hermeneutic endeavour

Reading the Bible as a hermeneutic endeavour is not a new challenge. Ancient Jewish readers of the Hebrew Bible called upon diverse techniques, including the literal, allegorical, midrashic/inquiry-based, and pesher/mystical, when seeking to discern the words of the Lord/YHWH (Elman 2005). Diverse early Christian approaches to reading the Bible drew variously on hermeneutic techniques from Jewish and Greek circles (Blowers and Martens 2019). When the devil tempted Jesus, says John Cassian (fourth century), he twisted the precious sayings of scripture into a dangerous sense. Likewise, the devil will try 'to cheat us with counterfeits' (*Conferences*: conference 1, ch. 20; see Cassian 1994). For Cassian and the ancient church, there was no 'reveal-it-all' formula but a reminder to stay hermeneutically focused on the person of Christ Jesus and to 'understand the drift of Scripture' toward the kingdom of God (*Institutes*: book VIII, ch. 21; see Cassian 1984).

Reading the Bible in search of the wisdom of the Holy Spirit must therefore be distinguished from seeking specific answers to questions from philosophy, literature, art, history, or science, etc. Using the Bible to provide information in the modern study of biology could be dangerous, for instance, because the moral truth of biblical texts cannot be captured in a system of ethical coordinates or arbitrary selections of verses. Finding biblical 'proofs' is always in danger of claiming divine authority for the vested interests of

humans. Analyses of the context will influence the reconstruction of the biblical message. The opposite, namely an inductive case study approach that requires a social analysis of the situation, can also be inappropriate if it over-emphasizes the context in assessing the meaning of a text, e.g. as a 'site of struggle' (Mosala 1989; Bosch 1991: 420–432). The critical task is one of hermeneutics, including a hermeneutics of suspicion over ideological distortions, discerning what may have gone wrong where and when. Understanding requires a selection of biblical motifs and a clustering together of such motifs in what may be termed heuristic keys and/or doctrinal constructs that are necessary in order to establish appropriate links between text and context (Conradie 2010).

3.5 The Bible in everyday life

As considered above, the Bible is commonly used – and sometimes misused – by Christians in seeking to understand and resolve ethical issues in everyday life. There is both promise and peril in how Christians draw guidance from the Bible for everyday life. Regardless, most would agree that the Bible is an important source for the formulation of beliefs (doctrines) and thinking about practice (ethics).

Richard Hays suggests that there are at least four necessary tasks that readers should undertake: the descriptive, the synthetic, the hermeneutical, and the pragmatic (Hays 1996). First, readers are invited to engage in careful readings of the texts of the Bible (the descriptive task). It is important to acknowledge the diverse contributions, differing messages, cultural and religious characteristics, genres, and intentions of the many texts that make up the canon of scripture. This allows readers to describe the varying ways in which moral issues are thought through and recorded in scripture. Second, readers may inquire into whether there are any coherences, or overarching theological characteristics, that bind the scriptures to one another synthetically. Concerns for justice, mercy, and peace, for instance, surface throughout the scriptures. An inductive approach (watching for the emergence of themes that arise from the texts) allows every particular event to be approached with questions about 'a unity of ethical perspective within the diversity of the canon' (Hays 1996: 4). Third, as above, is the hermeneutical task of 'building a bridge' between the reader's context and the texts of the Bible. This requires honesty and imagination – honesty in acknowledging that the Bible was not written for us or our contexts, and imagination to see what we can learn from how God deals with people and situations, and how people dealt with moral and ethical concerns (in both constructive and problematic ways). The fourth, pragmatic, task invites believers to live out what they learn from the scriptures individually, corporately, and societally. Responsible engagement with scripture is shown, among other things, in how readers take positions in relation to contentious contemporary ethical questions and concerns.

In other words, the role of the Bible in Christian ethics cannot be reduced to finding proof texts for moral decisions often taken on other grounds. Biblically informed Christian ethics requires theological discernment and Christian formation, especially within Christian communities. The Bible cannot and does not offer solutions to every question in life without the need for interpretation, arguably only on how everything in life may be related to knowing and serving God.

4 Christian ethics in diverse historical and ecumenical perspectives

Christian ethics, approached comparatively and collaboratively across diverse historical and ecumenical perspectives, is relatively underdeveloped as an area of study. The four perspectives below are, in effect, a commitment to ecumenical colloquy in Christian ethics, and begin to reveal where common ground is shared and where emphases differ across Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran, and Pentecostal approaches to Christian ethics. Viewed as an exchange of gifts, ecumenical Christian ethics is a journey of mutual understanding toward better agreement and, perhaps, disagreement (Daucourt 2006).

4.1 An ethic of relationality: a Roman Catholic perspective

Catholic theological ethics, or moral theology, contains an individual and a social approach (often distinguished as 'social ethics'). Both are strongly joined through the concept of the human person, understood as a holistic, relational being, in relation both to transcendence and to fellow human beings. For this, trinitarian theology – with analogies between God's and humanity's relationality and personhood – has been central (Boff 2005; Greshake 1997). Ecofeminist approaches have extended this line of thought to include sensitivity to gender and nature (McFague 1987; Gebara 1999; Johnson 1992). As laid down in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (2004), such doctrine is based on the love of God for humanity in creation; the liberation of Israel from the bondage in Egypt; the revelation of triune love in the birth, life, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ; and the mission of the Church as visible sign of God's plan. It is also based on the recognition of human beings' fundamental rights as created in God's image, respecting their integrity, singularity, freedom, and dignity:

> The revelation in Christ of the mystery of God as Trinitarian love is at the same time the revelation of the vocation of the human person to love. This revelation sheds light on every aspect of the personal dignity and freedom of people, and on the depths of their social nature. 'Being a person in the image and likeness of God [...] involves existing in a relationship, in relation to the other "I"' [*Gaudium et Spes*: 10], because Godself, one and triune, is the communion of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. (Cassian, *Compendium*: note 34)

From there stem the principles of such doctrine: the common good, private property in relation to the preferential option for the poor (which came into the Church's social doctrine through liberation theology), subsidiarity, participation, and solidarity. The intention is to give a contribution from within – the Church's theological reflection – in the light of the perception of real contemporary challenges, towards an 'integral and solidary humanism' (*Compendium*, introduction: note 19).

Such openness and humility seeks to make a true and full contribution in cooperation towards the wellbeing of humanity. It is the result of social thought since Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum* on capital and labour (1891), reinforced especially by Pope John XXIII's encyclical *Mater et Magistra* (1961), the Second Vatican Council, namely *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), and not least in Pope Francis' recent encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* on fraternity and social friendship (2020a). It is conceived around the biblical narrative of the Good Samaritan, and deeply inspired by St Francis of Assisi – who, as it is recalled, in the midst of a crusade went to see the Sultan Malik-el-Kamil of Egypt, and recommended to those living 'among the Saracens and other nonbelievers' not to 'engage in arguments or disputes, but to be subject to every human creature for God's sake' (*Fratelli Tutti*: note 3; Pope Francis 2020a). Francis also recalls the Grand Imam Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, together with whom he declared that 'God has created all human beings equal in rights, duties and dignity, and has called them to live together as brothers and sisters' (*Fratelli Tutti*: note 4; Pope Francis 2020a). Some issues of a still more individualized morality in Catholic doctrine – especially those related to sexual issues, contraception, abortion, and marriage/divorce – remain mostly closed to discussion, although they are highly disputed among the faithful themselves. Despite this, there is a clear offer in *Fratelli Tutti* for dialogue, mutual learning, and cooperation for the good of all, together with people of other faiths. The thorough engagement of the Catholic Church, and its organizations like Caritas, in diaconal work for refugees, the poor, children, elderly people, and people with disabilities, among other groups of high vulnerability, is immeasurable.

4.2 An ethic of transfiguration: Eastern Orthodox perspectives

Oriental and Eastern Orthodox Christianities may be studied across a wide range of time periods, geographical regions, and political landscapes (Guglielmi 2022; Parry 2008; Menze 2008). It would be a vast oversimplification to insist upon a single easily defined ethics as being the ethics of the Eastern Church. Moreover, questions regarding what distinguishes 'East' from 'West' bring up a host of problems, ranging from the geographical and historical to the theological and ecclesiological. A modest proposal, therefore, is to offer an ethics of the Eastern Orthodox Church, a single perspective which is nonetheless broadly representative of the 'spirit' of Orthodoxy: an ethics of transfiguration (Harakas 1984; Guroian 1981; Ware 2015).

This ethics of transfiguration can be approached from two perspectives: (1) that of the end (*telos*), the ultimate good of deification (*theosis*), as the aim of the ethical life; (2) the means to that end, the practical life as the embodiment of that end in the present, and the path to its eschatological realization. These two perspectives can themselves be subdivided into: (1a) personal deification; (1b) cosmic transfiguration; (2a) the ascetic practice of the virtues; (2b) the contemplation of God and nature (Chistyakova 2021).

The *telos* of the Christian life in the Orthodox tradition is personal deification and cosmic transfiguration. This is typically expressed in terms of the distinction between 'image' and 'likeness' (Gen 1:27). Humanity was created in the image of God (interpreted as signifying potential for deification) and are called to realize the likeness (the actualization of this potential: *theosis*). Personal deification means union with God – literally becoming godlike – to the extent that this is possible for the finite human creature. This does not imply identity with God's essence, but participation in the uncreated 'energies' of God. Like an iron in the fire, or air permeated by light, one becomes by grace what God is by nature. This is the true aim of the incarnation, expressed by the bold patristic maxim: God became human so that humanity might become divine.

What is arguably distinctive about the Orthodox doctrine of deification is its cosmic aspect, sometimes referred to as a 'cosmic liturgy'. According to the great seventh-century Byzantine theologian Maximus the Confessor (cf. Louth 2017), the human is a 'microcosm', a world in miniature, called to mediate between God and the whole of creation. Insofar as the human is not separate from nature, but rather a kind of matrix in whom the whole of creation is concentrated, personal deification coincides with cosmic transfiguration. Just as human sin introduced death and corruption into the world, so human deification in Christ culminates in a transfigured cosmos, a new heaven, and a new earth (2 Pet 3:13).

The path to deification and transfiguration, the '*ethikos*', is summed up in the practice of virtue and contemplation. In this sense, the ethos of the Orthodox Church is inherently 'mystical'; both monastics and lay people are called to a life of asceticism, prayer, fasting, and vigils, to the extent that they are able. Crucially, the Orthodox tradition does not separate the practical from the contemplative life, though one might naturally emphasize one over the other. Lay people in particular have less time for contemplation and more opportunity than monks for active engagement. Strictly speaking, however, virtue and contemplation are inseparable. Together, they work to overcome the inner fragmentation of the self and the outer divisions of the world introduced by ignorance and sin. All the virtues – be they humility, forbearance, detachment, charity, love, fasting, contemplative prayer, vigils, or worship – represent means of overcoming the instability of a life centred upon the self (*philautia*), leading to a more grounded God-centred life (*philokalia*: 'love of the Beautiful'). The ethical life, in essence, represents the overcoming of divisions

(both inner and outer) and the progressive unification of self and world, culminating in union with Christ and the trihypostatic God who alone is One. The inherently unificatory practice of the virtues (as manifold expressions of love) is corroborated by contemplative insight into the unity of the self, nature, and the divine. Ultimately, *theosis* is effected by the conjunction of creaturely love and divine grace. Both virtue and contemplation thus culminate in love (Schmemann 1963; Thunberg 1995; Tollefsen 2008; Louth 2007).

One of the most promising aspects of the Orthodox ethics of transfiguration for the contemporary milieu lies in the emerging field of environmental theology – led by the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, dubbed the 'Green Patriarch' on account of his long-standing environmentalism. The Orthodox understanding of deification as embracing the whole of creation, along with its anthropology of mediation, finds practical application in care for creation. The embodied form of Orthodox liturgical worship – particularly its practice of icon veneration – results in a positive evaluation of the material world as a vehicle for worship and a means of spiritual communion. The recently-published *Toward and Ecology of Transfiguration* (2013) bears witness to the contemporary relevance of this ancient Orthodox ethic. Its editors state that

> while the divine essence (*ousia*) is eternally mysterious and unknowable, the uncreated energies or activity (*energeia*) of God can not only be known but encountered and experienced in this life and in this world, for they are at work everywhere around us. (Chryssavgis and Foltz 2013: 3)

One of the challenges for contemporary Orthodox ethics lies in its application in the ecclesiastical and political spheres. Ironically, perhaps, the ethics of transfiguration understood as a progressive unification of self and world is, lamentably, often absent from the world of ecclesiastical politics, which can descend into jurisdictional wrangling. While unified in doctrine and liturgical worship, the autocephalous (self-governing) nature of Orthodox Church polity issues in a multiplicity of ethnocentric communities with sometimes conflicting nationalistic agendas, and even war (Hamalis and Karras 2017). This hampers the Church's ability to effectively bear witness to the eschatological unity of God's kingdom as a present reality. Such unity may be manifested locally, but its global catholicity remains unfulfilled. In terms of church/state relations, the ethno-nationalist character of Orthodoxy sometimes results in a subservience of the church to the state. While charges of caesaropapism are inaccurate, the persistence of the Byzantine model of a 'symphony' between church and state can translate into giving sacred sanction to secular authorities (Hovorun 2016).

4.3 An ethic of grace: Lutheran perspectives

Every aspect of Martin Luther's (1483–1546) theology and ethics is determined by his biblically-derived doctrine of divine righteousness and the justification of the believer

by God's grace alone. In part, this emphasis was a polemic attack against the popular Catholic soteriology of his day that was based on human merit. In part, it was a simple affirmation of Pauline teaching that no human can merit the gospel of Christ or baptism; salvation is purely a gift, freely given (Bayer 2007; Wannenwetsch 2003; Bloomquist and Stumme 1998). An Augustinian monk and Catholic priest, Luther entered public life to dispute what he understood as being an abusive practice and a misunderstanding of penitence: the sale of indulgences. In times when life was short and always in danger, preoccupation with the afterlife weighted heavy in the minds of the populace. As Markus Wriedt emphasizes, Luther had experienced God as a wrathful judge demanding justice: 'the just God pursues the lawbreaker with wrath and punishment' (Wriedt 2003: 89). Famously, Luther's reported his rediscovery of the truths of God's grace through a re-reading of Paul's letter to the Romans:

> I, impeccable monk that I was, stood before God as a sinner with an extremely troubled conscience and I could not be sure that my merit would assuage him. I did not love, no, rather I hated the just God who punishes sinners. [...] This was how I was raging with wild and disturbed conscience. Thus I continued badgering Paul about that spot in Romans I seeking anxiously to know what it meant. (Luther 1543: 46)

Luther's ninety-five theses nailed to the church door at Wittenberg (equivalent of church noticeboard; in 1517) emphasized that only God can forgive and that the church should preach true prayer and repentance. There followed the 1518 Heidelberg disputation, and Luther's seminal pamphlet *On Christian Liberty* (1520b) which expounded Paul's teaching, especially Rom 13:8 concerning how love fulfils the law:

> A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.
> A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to none. (Luther 1520b)

At the heart of Lutheran ethics is this seeming contradiction that makes sense only in repentance and utter dependence upon the grace and mercy of God. Luther's related pamphlet *A Treatise on Good Works* (1520a) pursued the ethical question of living in Christ as freedom from 'works' whilst doing 'all kinds of works'. The believer is simultaneously justified by God's free grace and still in sin – a line of thought that helps the disciple amidst the deep vulnerabilities and ambiguities of life.

For Luther, while both the secular and the spiritual regiment are under God's rule, they should be neither confused nor separated. There is to be a critical and constructive relationship between church and state (von Sinner, Ulrich and Forster 2020). His influence on Western modernity, given the political impact of the Reformation on Europe, is disputed (Helmer 2019; Shagan 2019). So too is the extent to which Immanuel Kant can be compared with Luther rather than contrasted (Wilms 1998). Integral to these debates

is Luther's insistence that the fruits of faith should not be confused with the merits of salvation. Hence Dietrich Bonhoeffer's 1937 concern regarding 'cheap grace' that neglects to recall that Jesus calls disciples to follow a path that might lead to their death (Bonhoeffer 2003: 53), and Paul Ramsey's mid-twentieth-century question about the extent to which Lutheran ethics lacks rules: 'always in peril of opening the floodgates of anarchy and license in the name of freedom from the law' (Ramsey 1980: 77). Paul, writes Ramsey, states in 1 Cor 10:23, 24: 'All things are lawful' for the Christian. All things might not be helpful. However, the principle advocated by Paul is, says Ramsey, 'Love and do as you please'. Drawing upon his own Lutheran heritage, Bonhoeffer taught that to be a Christian was to live self-sacrificially as Christ himself had done. Jesus called Levi, son of Alphaus, to follow him. Levi got up and followed. The first step of discipleship is not a spoken confession of faith in Jesus but the obedient deed (Bonhoeffer 2003: 57). More recently, scholars have demonstrated anew the promise of Luther's ethics for today with its emphases on God's grace, human sin, divine command and freedom (Bloomquist and Stumme 1998; Wannenwetsch 2003; Bayer 2007; Westhelle 2016).

4.4 An ethic of experience: Pentecostal perspectives

Pentecostalism is an exceedingly variegated Christian movement, emerging in the twentieth century from a renewed emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit. Early Pentecostals inherited strict holiness ethics, marked by an abstention from anything 'worldly' – from fashionable clothing, alcohol consumption, and movie theatres, to social activism and warfare. This was paired with a strong millennialism, leaving the church to evangelize while Jesus would soon sort out the world (Anderson 1979; Wacker 2001). As end-time expectations faded and the movement spread into mainline Christianity, ethical strictures receded and new theologies offered investments in Christian wellbeing here and now. Large parts of the contemporary movement broadly align with evangelical ethics, but outliers exist in all areas of ethical debate, often justified with particular insights from the Holy Spirit. As a result, Pentecostal churches represent a wide array of ethical positions on almost any topic.

Pentecostal theologians have sought to develop the shared emphasis on the experience of the Holy Spirit into a foundational ethics. This is typically rooted in the central tenets of Spirit baptism and glossolalia (speaking in tongues), seen to enable Christians to break social boundaries and destructive behaviour as they participate in the liberating and regenerative work of God's Spirit in the world. While earlier publications were primarily oriented toward a liberating practice (e.g. Dempster 1991; Villafañe 1993; Johns 1993; Petersen 1996; Solivan 1998; Beckford 2000), more recent contributions have sought to lay the theological and philosophical foundations for a pneumatocentric ethics that encompasses all aspects of human and non-human life (Yong 2005; 2007; 2008; 2010; Wariboko 2012). Others have emphasized the role of the Spirit in establishing a unified

ecclesial community that projects God’s coming kingdom into this world (Christenson 1976; Castelo 2012). On this basis, Pentecostals debate a broad variety of ethical themes (see for example Anderson 1979; Kärkkäinen 2009; Wilkinson and Studebaker 2010), but two topics have been particularly challenging for the movement: racial reconciliation and gender equality.

The Azusa Street Revival of 1906, which is seen by many Pentecostals as the starting point of their movement, celebrated racially integrated services. This was a pioneering achievement half a century before the civil rights movement, but the movement soon frayed into racially segregated denominations, with other contexts, such as South Africa, following a similar trajectory. However, since the movement is marked by a substantial investment in its origin stories, the cosmopolitan vision of Azusa Street has become a standard bearer for ethical reflections on race, often framed as historiographies of decline (e.g. Clemmons 1996; Robeck 2006; Newman 2007). Such hagiographies of original purity have tended to stand in the way of a more systematic and foundational ethical reflection on race, in particular because racism tends to be framed in terms of individual prejudice and exclusion rather than an institutional ailment (Daniels 2021).

A similar picture emerges with regard to gender equality as the Pentecostal promise of a universal, liberating Spirit conflicts with a widespread affirmation of male headship and the exclusion of women from leadership roles. Scores of biographical, historical, and anthropological publications show how Pentecostal women have evaded gender limits by emphasizing their personal calling and spiritual gifts, but inasmuch as these are stories of exceptional empowerment they have prevented a systematic engagement with Pentecostal gender inequalities (e.g. Lawless 1988; Blumhofer 1993; Warner 1994; 2004; Alexander and Yong 2009). This has changed in recent years, however, with more comprehensive discussions emerging while significant parts of the movement are shifting to more egalitarian gender practices (Alexander and Yong 2009; Holmes 2009; Stephenson 2012). A critical engagement with gender-based violence and abuse has only just begun, however, and reflections on the gender binary as such are still absent (Alexander et al. 2022).

As the examples of race and gender show, Pentecostal ethical reflection tends to wrestle with the contrast between the movement’s theological proclamation of a Spirit-driven disruption of injustice and inequality and the outworking of this promise as racial prejudice, misogyny, inequality, and culture wars beset the church and society at large. Operating through the hermeneutical lens of the Pentecost event, the movement harbours an exceedingly broad and ambitious pneumatic vision of a renewed humanity and cosmos, which motivates Christians toward empathy and solidarity with all who suffer (Augustine 2021). However, inasmuch as this vision is idealized in Pentecostal historiography and

theology, it also prevents a critical reflection of the systemic barriers standing in the way of God's kingdom here and now.

4.5 An ethic of liberation: perspectives from the majority world

Liberation theology, like an ethic of liberation, is deeply committed to working towards the liberation of persons, indeed all of creation, that suffers injustice and oppression (Gutiérrez 1999: 19). This approach to Christian ethics emerged among Latin American Christians in the 1960s and was later adopted by Christians from other parts of the majority world, such as Asia and Africa. To understand the unique contribution of an ethic of liberation, it must be acknowledged that all ethical positions come from – and relate to – convictions of what is good, right, and just (or, as someone like Paul Ricoeur might say, what is good, right, and wise; Lovin 2011: 3–4; Ricoeur 2000: viii, 4, 155; Mendieta 2013: 3013–3014). In contrast to earlier (mainly European) theologies, which took their point of departure in relation to questions of belief and unbelief (i.e. doctrine, evangelism, ecclesiology), Latin American liberation theology took its point of departure as a critical engagement with the dehumanization of persons by social processes (Mendieta 2013: 3018).

Most ethical systems throughout history have sought to answer the primary question, 'what is the good life?' What differentiates various ethical theories and moral convictions is the understanding of the notion of 'the good'. Is goodness prosperity? Is goodness peace? Is goodness justice? What is 'the good' in the 'good life?' For an ethic of liberation, the articulation of 'the good' has to do with the ways in which humans live in relation to social systems. A social system can be understood to be either good or bad based on its capacity to either recognize and affirm the dignity and value of human persons, or to misrecognize human persons or even deliberately deny their dignity and rights. A good life is one in which the systems of power (political systems, economic systems, gender relations, religious systems, etc.) operate with justice and integrity that leads to human flourishing. More recently, branches of an ethic of liberation have emerged that focus on liberative animal ethics (cf. Linzey 2013; Singer 2015) and liberative ecological ethics (cf. Castillo 2019).

Liberation theologians often work in the tension that exists between contexts – the contexts of the lived realities of persons (such as suffering, injustice, and struggle), and the contexts of Christian faith (what is read in the scriptures, what is believed about the person of God, what is seen in the life and ministry of Jesus, what is believed the Church is and should be doing etc.; Rowland and Corner 1989: 1–4). Christopher Rowland and Miguel De La Torre explain that the agenda of liberation theology, as a distinct approach to theology and ethics, is to be found in 'its emphasis on the dialogue between Christian

tradition, social theory and the insight of the poor and marginalized into their situation, leading to action for change' (Rowland 1999: xv; De La Torre 2010; see also Bujo 2003).

The action-oriented, dialogical nature of liberation theology is one of its core characteristics. It makes a deliberate choice for the experiences and lives of the 'poor and marginalized', seeking to understand not only the content of the suffering that they experience but also the social and historical systems that have led to contemporary injustice and marginalization. Having understood these systems, an ethic of liberation seeks to act to empower individuals and communities to replace evil with good (Gutiérrez 1999: 19–20). As such, an ethics of liberation is commonly committed to engaging people's everyday lived experiences of poverty and subjugation. Second, it relates to the Christian scriptures and the Christian tradition as a source of moral authority that provides both theological insight and moral courage, for concrete actions towards liberation. Third, it is often a form of theology that envisions, and enacts, a radical form of Christian living that is in conflict with the dominant and oppressive systems of the age (political, economic, gender etc.). Fourth, an ethic of liberation is often enacted in practices of justice that both disrupt dominant systems in society and sustain those who live on the margins of those systems. In this schema, theology is a 'second act' which emerges from deep solidarity with the poor and radical action for liberation and justice (Bradstock and Rowland 2008: xxvi).

A precursor to Liberation Theology and an ethic of liberation is what has become known as radical theology. Radical theologians, and some liberation theologians, contend that the prophets of the Hebrew faith (found in many of the prophetic texts of the Hebrew scriptures), Jesus (as a religious and social non-conformist), and even the Apostle Paul and early Christians illustrate a radical disjuncture with the dominant religious, political, and economic systems of their times which contributed towards injustice and marginalization (Dussel 2004: 88). The radical nature of Jesus, the prophets, and the early church often serves as a source of inspiration, and theological conversation, to inform both liberation theologies and an ethic of liberation.

One can thus identify a clear hermeneutic commitment in this approach. It is predicated upon an understanding that there is a more just way to live that does not subjugate and oppress people or abuse creation. An ethic of liberation forms its understanding of what is good, right, and just from how it understands the world (making use of social analysis). However, it is also informed by how it understands the person of God (as a God of justice), the will of God (whose will is justice and liberation, a God who is on the side of the poor and marginalized), and the politics of faith (as advocating for political, economic, and social systems – a polis – that is just, fair, and orientated towards the protection of those who are most easily abused while also seeking to transform social systems to be more

just). Phillip Berryman summarizes the approach to liberation theology and an ethics of liberation as:

> (1) An interpretation of Christian faith out of the suffering, struggle, and hope of the poor.
> (2) A critique of society and the ideologies sustaining it.
> (3) A critique of the activity of the church and of Christians from the angle of the poor.
> (Berryman 2013: 6)

This hermeneutic commitment invites Christians to ask what the role of the church and Christians should be in addressing contemporary injustices, often perpetrated by politicians and political structures, businesspeople and corporations, and even by religious leaders and faith communities, who identify with Christianity and are members of churches. There are strong correlations between an ethic of liberation and other contemporary theologies and associated ethics such as feminist theologies, contextual theologies, queer theologies, Black theologies, and ecological theologies.

5 Christian ethics and climate change

Climate change refers to 'long-term shifts in temperatures and weather patterns […] primarily due to burning fossil fuels like coal, oil and gas' (UN Climate Change). In contemporary society, climate change is a global emergency in which disadvantaged groups suffer disproportionately (Islam and Winkel 2017) and which extends to future generations the risks produced by hard-heartedness among the rich, allowing the poorest people to suffer and further disadvantaging the already-disadvantaged. A critically important question in contemporary Christian ethics is how to contribute to the struggle against climate change and ensure that the largest burden does not fall on the poorest and most vulnerable people. Relationality, mutuality, and dirtification are presented here as three pillars of a Christian ethics approach to climate change.

5.1 Earth-rooted relationality

A person cannot be a human alone; a person is never alone when born but is born 'out of' and 'into' relationship. Everything that supports a human person shows that they are independent only in their interdependence and relationships (see Vaai and Casimira 2017). As in personal relationships, so too in ecological relationships: living organisms interact in complex ways that humans do not fully understand (Lovelock 1990). Indeed, in many ecological communities, i.e. different species of living beings occupying the same geographical area at the same time, relationality equates to survival. Thus, the initial horizon for understanding and interpreting Christian ethics as ecology is not the 'I' but rather the 'we'. Relationality, understood in these earth-rooted and non-anthropocentric ways, is integral to the conceptual framework needed for Christian ethics in the twenty-first century. Relationality may thus be understood as a core principle that guides ethical

decisions and directs praxis and is sometimes described as the most sacred primordial form of knowledge (see Vaai and Nabobo-Baba 2017). This focus on earth-rooted relationality runs counter to mainstream theological narratives that emphasize God's timelessness and transcendence, and is seen by some as having been demonized or silenced by the 'culture of whispers' (Tui Atua 2014: 12) in Western theology, especially when partnered with ethics of development which prioritize economic growth. Mindful of the perichoretic relationality of the three Persons of the Trinity and the presence of the divine in the midst of all created life, many are crying out for an earth-honouring ethic of relationship with the earth (Rasmussen 2012) as the only alternative to the Anthropocene and its multiple layers of domination (Conradie and Lai 2021: 16; Wallace 2021: 241).

5.2 Mutual belonging

'We lack an awareness of our common origin, of our mutual belonging, and of a future to be shared with everyone' (*Laudato Si'*: section 202; Pope Francis 2020b). Subtitled *On care for our common home*, Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si'* laments failures to appreciate our mutual belonging within the earth's ecology. The earth, like a sister or mother, 'opens her arms to embrace us' (*Laudato Si'*: section 1; Pope Francis 2020b) but has been so hurt and mistreated in the last two hundred years that ecosystems are failing, high pollution levels are causing millions of premature deaths, and the constant rise in the sea level is creating extremely serious situations for potentially a quarter of the world's population (Francis, *Laudato Si'*: section 24). God gave the world to all in common: 'The climate is a common good, belonging to all and meant for all' (Francis, *Laudato Si'*: section 23). Networks of solidarity and belonging, in any place, can turn from being a hell on earth into the setting for a dignified life (Francis, *Laudato Si'*: section 148). Heartfelt repentance and desire to change are needed, especially on the part of some rich countries whose huge consumption has repercussions on the poorest areas of the world (Francis, *Laudato Si'*: section 51).

Recognition of humans' mutual belonging – not only with all human beings but with the soil, water and air, animals, and plant groups – calls for a radicalization of approaches to Christian ethics, such that every ecological experience 'can become the experience of God' (Moltmann 2012: 138). An ethic of mutual belonging calls for radical challenges at the international level to rich and powerful countries that take from 'our common home' at the expense of small and poor countries. An ethic of mutual belonging calls for every person to understand themselves as part of multiple ecological relationships accountable to and responsible for each other, and for attentiveness to God's movement through the Spirit to create a 'liberation movement' (Bergmann 2015: 6–7). This trinitarian focus recalls the intrinsic goodness of all created things, the 'conviviality of creation' (Keller and Schneider 2011: 10), and uses a cosmological kinship model where everything is genealogically and relationally structured. In the Pacific, for example, Christian people refer to themselves

as ‘we the Earth’, or ‘we the ocean’ (Hau'ofa 1993: 2–17); the identity of the human being is tied to the identity of the ecological community of earth, air, sea, and water, and such identity is genuine only through protection and enhancement of this wider community.

5.3 Dirtification

Dirtification is an approach to environmental ethics that finds its language in dialogue with the Indigenous spiritualities of the Pacific grassroots communities, for whom dirt does not have negative connotations but speaks of the inheritors of a profound eco-relational ethics of life that connects all life to the dirt of the earth (Vaai 2021a: 15–29; Vaai 2021b: 209; see also Tui Atua 2014: 15–17). Dirtification is an interpretive standpoint that embraces the multiple ecological wellbeing narratives of people who are engaged with the dirt daily – whether in agriculture, as the victims of pollution, or in developing resilience to the world’s ecological plight. Rooting Christian ethics in protection of the environment from decay and destruction often starts both with the victims of oppression who have no choice but to live in dirt conditions and their struggle for alternative ways of caring for the earth (Zachariah 2010: 3).

6 Christian ethics and the body

As the world hungers for food and shelter, some Christian ethicists have made the methodological commitment to do Christian ethics *through* rather than *about* the body: the body gives tangible reality to the material and symbolic dimensions of existence, actualizing personal and interpersonal experiences that mediate between selfhood and the world, and inscribes human being in the world (Kristensen 2013). Hence the focus of this section on gender, sexuality, and food as embodiments of the mystery of participation in God’s creative love.

6.1 Gender, sexuality, body, and food

Gender, sexuality, the body, and food are intrinsic to creaturely existence and materialize personal and interpersonal embodiments of human experience; this is how we live in relationship ourselves, with other people, and with the surrounding world. Gender actualizes discourses regarding bodily and social constructions of self and other-related identities. Sexuality inscribes the desire for love and recognition in bodies shaped by social conventions and compromises (and, at times, by imposed rules and norms). Food satisfies our hunger, which is an embodiment of the desire and need to survive.

Simultaneously, gender, sexuality, body, and food exceed their material aspects insofar as each can be poietic, i.e. iconic and symbolic expressions of who we are and what we envision, desire, or imagine we might become (Ward 2005). Gender and sexuality are more than biological and genetic factors; both embody, express, and symbolize

a vast plurality of self-identities whilst also being shaped by social conventions and assumptions. Gender and sexuality can become conventions that inscribe taboos and determine expectations about what is (not) accepted and what is chastised. In some societies, gender and sexuality are determining factors in social relations, with attitudes and actions prescribed by heteropatriarchal and dualistic epistemologies that legitimize the exploitation, subordination, and ghettoizing of the 'other' (Butler 1993); the 'other' typically pertains to identities other than male and heterosexual, with alternative identities too often considered 'deviant'. In such societies, some bodies matter more than others, depending on their gender, sexual, racial, ethnic, and economic classifications and beliefs, and their cultural, religious, and political assumptions (see Butler 1993) – which runs counter to Christian affirmation of the inalienable dignity of all (*Laudato Si'*: section 30; Pope Francis 2020b).

Likewise, food is not only material nourishment for the body, because it represents our personal taste, cultural identity/ies, social constructions of what is (not) edible, and our political and economic discourses that determine who eats plentifully – even to the point of wasting tonnes of food – and who experiences hunger (Douglas 2001; Counihan and Esterik 1997). As the body exceeds physical, biological, chemical, and genetic data and is, in some sense, who we are, so too food is more than the sum of nutritional factors; it represents who we are or imagine ourselves to be. Food can be profoundly poietic in shaping and building communities, creating a sense of commensality and symbolically expressing mutual care for people and the planet (Counihan 1999). Gender, sexuality, body, and food are all profoundly relational. All mediate our relationships with ourselves, people, and nature; they shape and are shaped by culture and historical contexts, personal beliefs, and experiences at the interpersonal, inter-cultural, and trans-historical level (Ward 2005).

6.2 Incarnational and eucharistic theology of the body

In Christian ethics, gender, sexuality, body, and food are understood to be intrinsically good by virtue of their createdness and because God the Son became 'flesh' to 'live among us' (John 1:14; Phil 2:7). Furthermore, because Christ Jesus took the 'form of a slave', some Christians understand God's Spirit to be present especially in the bodies of those who are 'other', who live precariously and suffer abjection (Méndez-Montoya 2009; 2021). For some, Jesus' gender transgression – as recognized by Julian of Norwich who spoke of Jesus as Mother (Walker Bynum 1984) – invites resistance against any heteropatriarchal absolutization of Jesus' masculinity and also the transgressing of racial, sexual, economic, and other limits to understanding Jesus' personhood. This transgression of rigid gender roles, and more, is argued to be further affirmed by Paul, who reminded early Christian communities that identity is Christic (Gal 3:28), i.e. a dynamic and ongoing process of becoming one diverse body yet to be fully discovered (Méndez-

Montoya 2021). Through the breaking and sharing of bread with everyone – particularly those who most hunger materially, emotionally, and spiritually – Christians are reminded of God's own *koinonia*, a communion of nurturing love that becomes life-giving food, inviting us to become eucharistic people: by performing an inclusive table whereby the 'other' – including the planet – really matters (see Méndez-Montoya 2009). The Eucharist imagines and performs a Christic body, a trans-corporeal body that reaches out to, coabides with, and embraces other bodies, overcoming frontiers and divisions, transforming hatred and violence into a trans-corporeal practice of love and peace (Ward 2003: 108).

6.3 The body, life, and the cosmos

Christian ethics is an ethics of life. Although it recognizes finitude, the reality of suffering, and vulnerability (Stålsett 2023), it engages in the preservation and deprecarization of life. The ethics of life, bioethics – conceived by American oncologist Van Rensselaer Potter – stems from distressing examples of the abuse of populations for research, without their knowledge or acknowledgment, nor any chance of therapy. The bioethical 'trinity' that developed from there is that any medical treatment and/or experiment has to consider all the potential benefits and risks, the informed consent of the patient, and the principle of justice (see The History of Medical Ethics). Thus, beyond the involvement and protection of individuals, there is a societal dimension involved – who is benefitted and to whom are or will benefits be available? How should restricted resources be applied responsibly? More recent challenges dig deeper into human nature, for instance in terms of the potentiality – and dangers – of gene enhancement, prenatal diagnosis, and therapeutic or reproductive cloning, which trigger new debates on identity, personality, health, sickness, and cure. Ethics has difficulties in keeping up with the pace of research and new possibilities.

Bioethics reflects mainly the right to life of humans – and their flourishing – from conception to death (Meilaender 2020). However, it also refers to the embeddedness of the human body within the whole of creation and therefore includes the protection of animals and nature and namely of biodiversity. In the Anthropocene, when human beings' influence on nature through pollution and mineral exploration – to name just two dimensions – is particularly visible and measurable, humans' responsibility for their imprint on the environment becomes a special challenge and task for Christian ethics (Rasmussen 2023).

7 Christian ethics and peacemaking

Peacemaking is at the heart of Jesus' teaching (Matt 5:9; Matt 26:51–52; Mark 9:50; Luke 19:42), which many have interpreted as meaning that Christians must live non-violently in the world of violence (Cahill 2019). In the earliest years of the church, the first Christians predominantly interpreted Jesus' words as requiring strict non-violence and precluding

military service (von Harnack 1905; Cadoux 1919; Hornus 1980; cf Iosif 2013: 6). Much changed when Emperor Constantine the Great made Christianity the official religion of the empire (313); the early church was no longer liable to persecution and it became normal for early Christians to revere the emperor as protector of the church. The state accepted the church and the church accepted the state. Christians suddenly found themselves transformed from a persecuted sect to a prominent position of influence within the empire (Novak 2001). Unlike during previous military service, when all soldiers had previously been required to utter oaths of allegiance to the (almost deified) emperor and to pagan gods, it was now not necessary for Christians to object to the oaths of allegiance.

7.1 History/ies of overly permissive religious authorization of war?

History/ies of Christian ethics reveal many instances of ecclesial authorities endorsing the use of war in ways that confuse the furtherance of Christianity with advancement of military and economic might. During the Roman Empire, use of the symbol of the cross in battle introduced ambiguity into interpretations of the 'enemy' as both the devil and his demons and potentially also the Visigoths or other political adversaries of the Roman empire (Hopko 2010). The Crusades were a deeply problematic mix of genuine piety, military ferocity, greed, prejudice, and violence, masked as religious devotion (Tyerman 2009; Riley-Smith 2001). Modern histories of colonialism saw conquest and territorial possession (mis)construed as a divine providential plan for the expansion of Christendom, and wars against idolatry (Lantigua 2020: 31). Oversimplifications are all too easy; for example, sixteenth-century debates about the rights and treatment of indigenous peoples by European colonizers contained discourses of universal natural rights alongside deeply problematic ethno-racial assumptions. As David M. Lantigua summarizes, however, 'Church law, or canon law, generated a normative vocabulary of difference contrasting the orthodox faithful from heretics and schismatics among the baptized' (Lantigua 2020: 31). The militarized expansion of Latin Europe was underpinned by theologico-ethical judgment against non-Westerners, both Christian and non-Christian. Christian pacifism, i.e. the claim that war and violence are unjustifiable under any circumstances, thus has supporting arguments not only from Jesus' teaching but also from history/ies of unacceptable permissiveness.

7.2 Just war reasoning?

Just war reasoning describes a tradition(s) of moral argumentation that allows exceptions to non-violence in certain circumstances. With theologico-ethical roots in the writings of Ambrose, Augustine, Aquinas, Gratian, Isidore of Seville, the canon lawyers of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and the Salamancan school of moral theology (among others), those who reason for just war theory tend to accept that violent coercion is

sometimes necessary for the restraint of wrongdoing and the functioning of divine providence through human law-making and political activity. John Langan, SJ summarizes the principal elements of Augustine's founding contribution to Western Christian thinking about war and peace as follows:

> St. Augustine's just war theory involves eight principal elements: a) a punitive conception of war, b) assessment of the evil of war in terms of the moral evil of attitudes and desires, c) a search for authorization for the use of violence, d) a dualistic epistemology which gives priority to spiritual goods, e) interpretation of evangelical norms in terms of inner attitudes, f) passive attitude to authority and social change, g) use of Biblical texts to legitimate participation in war, and h) an analogical conception of peace. It does not include non-combatant immunity or conscientious objection. (Langan 1984: 19)

Augustine was a pastor and bishop who nowhere wrote a systematic or textbook-like account of just war reasoning, but responded in letters and longer reflections to matters of immediate concern. There, he held that law's violence is preferable to disorder and as a way of countering the manifestations of fallen human nature. The purpose of law, wrote Augustine, is to establish and maintain 'the tranquility of order' (*City of God* 19.13: 938; see Augustine of Hippo 1984).

In the twentieth century, Paul Ramsey reconsidered just war reasoning. As Therese Feiler has summarized, he 'developed it into a Christian realism vis-à-vis the Civil Rights movement, the Cold War, and the Vietnam War' (Feiler 2015: 343; Ramsey 1980). Oliver O'Donovan reinterpreted Augustine's theologico-ethic of war to argue that the moral authority to make war is at root a judicial authority. In a domestic context, the police and criminal justice system undertake 'ordinary' coercive measures to ensure the peaceable ordering of societies. In international affairs, judgment against wrongdoing must sometimes be exercised using 'extraordinary' means of warfare. Critically important, however, is that just war reasoning be understood as a judicial model of war:

(1) A belligerent has to act for the right not our right (or my right);
(2) Just war should not be conceived in terms of *duellum*, i.e. based on the national right of self-interest or self-defence (at least primarily), but within a structure of authorized arbitration;
(3) A just war is not the 'confrontation of two' (*duellum*) because all oppositions are subject to the pacific judgment of God.

Hence, says O'Donovan:

> We have identified two conditions for the authority to venture judgement [about and] in war:
> (a) the existence of a conspicuous right, and
> (b) the want of a formal institution to enforce it. (O'Donovan 2003: 25)

Critically, armed conflict is conceived as an extraordinary extension of ordinary acts of judgment: ‘There is only one “just intention” in armed conflict and that is to distinguish innocence from guilt by overcoming direct co-operation in wrong’ (O'Donovan 2003: 42). God’s will for humankind is peace; God’s peace is the ontological truth of creation, the goal of history, and a practical demand laid upon humankind. The difficulty for the pacifist, says O’Donovan, is that they choose not to act in defence of the weak and innocent, which might be deemed as much a demand of Christian teaching as the idea of nonviolence (O'Donovan 2003: 7). Pacifism is not simply a refusal to act but a refusal to enact the reconciling praxis of judgment.

7.3 New challenges

Tactical nuclear weapons, robots, machine learning, and digital technologies more generally are bringing new challenges to peacemaking. Hence Pope Francis wrote in 2022: ‘In view of this, it is very difficult nowadays to invoke the rational criteria elaborated in earlier centuries to speak of the possibility of a “just war”. Never again war!’ (*Fratelli Tutti*: section 258; Pope Francis 2020a). Yet threats to peace from aggressors of various descriptions continue. How far Christian pacifists and just war reasoners will be able to walk together is an open question, but both will perhaps keep company for a good part of the way (Barth 1961: 458). Perhaps the religions have more contributions to make together about the importance of political accountability on the world stage for threats to justice and peace, and for new models of responsibility, regulation, and accountability with respect to weapons control. In the meantime, the obligation upon Christian people to pray for those bearing the burdens of governance – which include ‘the welfare of the city’ and ‘security of the whole kingdom’ – persists (Aquinas 2003: 58).

8 Concluding comments

Christian ethics is evangelical: while culturally and experientially diverse, an approach to ethics described as ‘Christian’ is also unified in the sense of being centred on Christ Jesus and the good news of his life, death, resurrection, and ascension.

Christian ethics is practical: comprising a hermeneutic that moves continuously between doctrinal considerations and the everyday realities of lived experience, an approach to ethics described as ‘Christian’ is always somehow about the seeking of good and striving to avoid evil in human affairs.

Christian ethics is embodied: taking seriously the fact that God confers material bodiliness upon human and other creatures, an approach to ethics described as ‘Christian’ is typically committed to doing ethics through the body rather than merely about the body, in solidarity with the experience of bodies in suffering and pain, health, and/or wellbeing.

Christian ethics is context-specific and global in reach: whether gross socioeconomic inequality/ies, climate change and the resulting food insecurity and migration, the destruction caused every day by oppression and war, care of the body, or more besides, the realities engaged by Christian ethics are experienced locally but often exceed the local and personal in terms of responsibility/ies (not) exercised, wrongs committed, and failures in love of God and neighbour.

Christian ethics is biased to the poorest and least advantaged: mindful that spiritual poverty has positive connotations of being unattached to material goods, the evil of material poverty calls for an approach to ethics described as 'Christian' to strive always for its alleviation.

Christian ethics is more than specified here. Future generations of believers and scholars will continue the work, continuing to seek the practical wisdom of basic New Testament concepts – *apolytrōsis* (redemption), *alētheia* (truth), *kerygma* (proclamation), *koinonia* (community), *leiturgia* (worship), *diakonia* (service), *iasis* (healing), and *eirēnē* (peace).

Attributions

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