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PUBLIC ETHICAL DISCOURSES AND THE DIVERSITY OF CULTURES,
RELIGIONS, AND SUBJECTIVITY IN HISTORY:
CAN WE AGREE ON ANYTHING?

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Abstract: Ethics deals with how we make decisions and the actions we perform. In decision-making, one weighs the pros and the cons of any course of action. Besides the realm of the private, there are ethical issues regularly dealt with in public discourses. Human identity in most instances is a cultural and religious construct. Our socio-historical background as human beings is constitutive of our identity and also informs our ethical decision making. In this essay, I argue for a possibility of positively incorporating ideas from world religions and diverse cultures into public ethical discourses. Since world religions are about people, it is possible to appropriate humanity as understood in religions in the development of ethics. Hence, I present religions as practically relevant in the analysis of public ethical issues. Public ethical discourses are viewed as inclusive of history, religion, and culture. Further, the work of the philosopher Paul Ricoeur is presented as a way of reconciling subjectivity and objectivity in history and ethics. This essay is an analysis on ways in which the debate on ethical issues can incorporate all the voices in a society without excluding anyone while avoiding ideological extremism.

Key Words: Ethics, public discourse, society, religion, culture, subjectivity, objectivity, history, Ricoeur

In many societies today, there are public debates over issues which have an ethical dimension. For example, many cable television shows present hosts and guests who are ideologically bent on either to the left or the right of the political spectrum. Such television shows present the participants with an avenue where they advocate their ways as the only way for their society and its political/economic life, and all this is done without referencing (through footnotes or other means) the sources that inform their perspectives.¹ Few people in the public forum openly refer to their religious or cultural background as informing their worldview. Unfortunately, some people, in the name of their religion, also espouse some rather extreme ideas which they propagate as the viewpoint they want their society to uphold. Some of these extreme ideas, whether religious or secular, can lead to violence. Violence is generally first justified in the mind of the violent person through intellectual arguments before it is physically implemented. This is usually true of all intolerant and sectarian rhetoric which sometimes leads to psychological and physical destruction of the other as a human subject. Hate speech is sometimes a precursor of violent action against another perceived as the enemy or just different. All these apply to how society deals with differences in ideology, religion, sexual orientation, race, dietary concerns, among others. Secularists and also members of many religions contribute to the ethical debates in their respective societies. An open public reference to religions and cultures makes it possible for a diverse and honest participation in public ethical discourses. Public ethical discourses are supposedly inclusive since they are deliberative processes which deal with issues in particular societies. In this essay, I analyze ways in which the debate on ethical issues can incorporate all the voices in society without excluding anyone while avoiding extremism. Sectarianism in ethical debates in society has to be avoided. It is, therefore, necessary to recover the human dimension in all religious, social, and political life of a society.

Understanding human beings as sharing similar needs makes it possible for people to work together for the good of all in a society. An example is the recent debate and legislation on healthcare reforms in the United States of America which brought together the secular left and some religious denominations concerned with the plight of the less economically privileged members of society. Hence, it is fitting to argue for the possibility of debate by people of different ideological backgrounds especially on matters of public policy. To achieve a cohesive society, dialogue of representative voices is a quintessential component.

The Socio-Historical Nature of Human Existence

Human identity in most instances is a cultural and religious construct. Our socio-historical background as human beings is constitutive

of our identity and also informs our ethical decision making. Many world religions have explicit ethical prescriptions for their followers. Religions also wish for all people to embrace their way of life. In a debate on public policy, people bring all that informs their ethical predilections even without mentioning it. This includes religion and cultural-ethnic background.

It is arguably possible for people who are members of the same society to overcome sectarianism. This possibility, as suggested here, requires paying attention to world religions, cultures, and history. Listening to the ideologically other is necessary in overcoming sectarianism in ethical discourse especially in the public square. Ethical discourse stands to gain if it appeals to cultures and religions. This engagement opens new areas of ethical agreement especially in public discourse. There is never an abstract human being since all people live in historical and cultural contexts. Further, even the so-called autonomous ethical reasoning is also historically and culturally conditioned. We have to, therefore, acknowledge the role human reason plays in ethical discourse and also embrace religions, cultures, and history as irreplaceable factors in the processes of public ethical discourses. Human capacity for autonomous ethical reasoning is always located in some historical, cultural, or even religious milieu. Hence, the development of basic ethical principles has to be understood as an inclusive process of inquiry rather than an exclusive one. It is inclusive of cultures, religions, social environment, among other elements that shape human living in society.

Historically, there is great importance placed upon the possibility and to some extent necessity of a universal ethics. For example, St. Thomas Aquinas saw the natural law as the imprint of eternal reason in all human beings. From the perspective of Aquinas, all people could know through their reason (human nature) what is good and to be done and what is evil and to be avoided.² Immanuel Kant in his categorical imperative also argues for the possibility of universality in ethics:

...nothing is left but the conformity of actions as such with universal law, which alone is to serve the will as its principle, that is, *I ought never to act except in such a way that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law.*³

Although Kant also critiqued pure reason, his categorical imperative gives an impression of a reason that is pure or unfettered by any historical context or social environment. The source of ethics, especially in the Kantian perspective, is the human subject with the rational (metaphysical) capacity for moral deliberation.

It is important to note here that moral philosophy and religious ethics are viewed as compatible as long as religious ethics appeals to human reasoning in the formulation or explication of its moral norms.

Some religions claim their ethical teachings to have a divine origin but when examined closely they have a similarity to philosophical moral principles. For example, the command not to kill the innocent is both a religious and a moral philosophical principle. The systems of religious ethics are not always a complete reversal of the moral systems.⁴

Various perspectives on human nature as witnessed in various world religions provide a possible link between religious ethics and philosophical ethics. Each religion offers an embedded view of human nature and the world. Religious pluralism is an asset since religions offer different and sometimes refreshing ways of understanding humanity and the world people inhabit. Furthermore, religious sectarianism is to be overcome by recovering the human element as understood in the religions of the world. The energy wasted in religious conflicts would be best used by promoting the well-being of humanity and all life forms in the universe. Hence, there is need to recover the wisdom embedded in various world religions in order to use it to foster peace. Hans Küng has suggested that the wars in the world today are religious in nature and peace can only be attained through reconciliation of religions.⁵ Human beings understand themselves in diverse ways. Culture and religion are different languages through which we understand ourselves. Diversity, therefore, is philosophical, historical, religious, and includes all other experiences which shape human living and thought. Hence, it is important to establish grounds on which to approach human diversity.

Culture, Religion, and Ethics

It is almost impossible in contemporary times to find a society that is culturally homogeneous. In many societies, there are dominant cultures and also varieties of sub-cultural groups. Religions also promote particular cultures. All religions have particular ways of understanding the nature of the human person and ethics. For example, David Novak argues that Jewish ethics has elements of particularity and universality.⁶ Kwasi Wiredu, an African philosopher, also argues for universalism and particularism in religion. Wiredu cites common features found in many religions such as belief in a supreme being, worship, ethical dimension, and a social framework.⁷ Religions provide more particular ways of addressing ethical issues in the contemporary world such as human rights, international peace, weapons of mass destruction, and other issues that continually arise in our world. Notably, the doctrine of human rights as structured and propagated in documents such as the United Nations' *Universal Declaration on Human Rights* have as their foundation the classical western understanding of the human person as an individual who is unique, separate, and an undivided self-determining agent. However, the understanding of the individualized nature of the human person is not as universal as it is purported to be since human persons are shaped by social

and historical conditions. Human life is lived in a society or a community that has its own unique culture. Of significance is the view that a human person is a social and a cultural being. From the preceding, we can also understand Alasdair MacIntyre's view of human rights or natural rights as fiction and as such are real just as the imaginary unicorns are real if they do not have historical and social structures as their foundation. For MacIntyre, human rights are socially conditioned by a historical context. They require social institutions and therefore cannot be simply justified in an abstract rational way.⁸

World Religions Shape Social-Historical Contexts

World religions provide people with a variety of cultural ways of being in the world. For example, Michael Von Brück states: "A globalized uniform culture would be injustice, a horror, and a sign of death. All religions should commit themselves to resist uniformity and domination but should seek cooperation and exchange."⁹ Religions have ethical systems ingrained in their structures. Religious diversity is a good thing. It provides different dimensions by which human living in the world can be understood. While classical western philosophy provides a universalized abstract human nature, religions of the world almost always provide an understanding of the human person which is a "we-self" as opposed to the "I-self."¹⁰

Klaus K. Klostermaier observes there is a presence of a "we-self" ethics all over the world: "Traditional ethic does not appeal to individual conscience but to collective duty. The primary purpose of traditional ethic is the maintenance and continuity of a particular order of society, not the preservation of an individual life."¹¹ Collective ethics is best embodied in religions. Religions present human existence as taking place in a social context. Harold Coward has also argued that while the understanding of the self has led to the protection of individual rights there is the loss of our sense of collective interrelationships with other humans and with the natural environment that makes our continued life possible.¹² Self-interests as motivation for human living hits a dead-end when they lead to the isolation of the human person. The "I-Self" seeks maximum benefits for oneself against the good of other persons. It is as the philosopher Thomas Hobbes referred to the never ceasing struggle seeking power after power in human nature.

Many cultures, religions, and philosophies recognize self-identity as constructed by participating in a "family" or personal relationships. My personal identity is defined by my encounter with other people and the part of the world where I live. Derek Parfit argues that personal identity includes physical and psychological connectedness which has a social dimension.¹³ The understanding of human beings as "we-self" in world religions is seen most clearly in the interrelationships in a community as

an extended family. Instead of emphasis on the nuclear family, the focus is on the extended family. The common good of all persons is the central concern. Communal sharing of life becomes the foundation of all social concerns. For example, the Buddhist no-self doctrine leads to opening (or overcoming) the illusion of boundaries of self and with it the realization of universal compassion. The same can be said of the gospel of Jesus of Nazareth: “Do to others whatever you would have them do to you. This is the law and the prophets.” (Matthew 7: 12)

Another example is John S. Mbiti, writing on African philosophy and religions, he presents the African person’s understanding of self as “I am because we are.”¹⁴ Mbiti refers to African individuality as radically connected to a community. Bénézet Bujo also presents an African social existence when he states: “For Black Africa, it is not the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum* (“I think, therefore I am”) but an existential *cognatus sum, ergo sumus* [“I am known, therefore we are”] that is decisive.”¹⁵

In all cultures and religions, an appreciation of the human person in society with others is the basis for certain ethical claims such as the rights to self-preservation, free self-determination, freedom of thought or imagination, and movement, among others. Human rights teachings are similar to some of the religious teachings on the respect or honor of the human person. For example, Sumner Twiss argues human rights are compatible with Confucianism. He states, “...the Confucian tradition is greatly concerned about all those conditions—for example, social, economic, and educational—that bear on people’s ability to cultivate their moral potential to flourish as responsible members of an organically flourishing community in a harmoniously functioning universe.”¹⁶

Further, human rights are the necessary conditions for human actions.¹⁷ They are constitutive elements of human freedom and wellbeing. Hence, an understanding of the human person in various world religions is a contextually relevant foundation for ethics. Although religions may seem to eschew a particularist ethics, they are diverse manifestations of the common human nature. Religions are about human persons and their worldviews. Hence, an appropriation of human nature as expressed in various religious traditions is a possible foundation for some ethical considerations in public discourse. In this discussion, the distinction between a philosophical ethics and a religious ethics is viewed as very thin since both appeals to some dimension of human nature. All ethical systems have human nature at their core, and therefore a comprehensive understanding of human nature can lead to a better grasp of ethical issues.

Although it is not without controversy,¹⁸ human nature is a *conditio sine quo non* in understanding the nature of ethics. The development of ethics is linked to an understanding of human nature, and therefore religions of the world have something to contribute. Human nature, religion, and ethics are linked. The suggested triad of interrelationships

between human nature, religion, and ethics, points to a further relationship between ethical argumentation and the social and the natural sciences. Hence ethics can be said to benefit from research in other academic disciplines.¹⁹

From a practical perspective, human nature is not a preserve of any one academic discipline. Of great importance is the realization that we make ethical judgments based upon our assessment and understanding of human nature. For example, besides the basic needs and requirements for the flourishing of the human person, such as air, water and food, there are also the necessary conditions for human existence such as free and responsible action and the pursuit of knowledge and happiness. To such basic requirements for human life, there can be no valid argument against them. However, these basic requirements are understood, expressed, and put into practice in many ways.

In addition, ethical concerns as expressed in some norms of human conduct can be referred to as expressing basic needs inherent in human nature. If the basic requirements for human well being are understood as already given in human nature, then what remains is to discover them. The argument hinges on the view that human nature is conceived as the same among all people, however, a further specification has to account for cultural differences among people in various regions of the world. Being human, we are cultural beings.

For practical and theoretical purposes, an understanding of human nature constitutes one of the many factors considered in developing the reality of ethical principles. Religions offer ways of understanding peoples' views of themselves, their history, their politics, their economy, and all other areas of their lives. In considering that religions undeniably shape their adherents worldview or how they live their lives, it is important to remember the role religion plays in shaping the believers' ethics. Just as culture, history and philosophy are important to ethics, so also is religion in shaping ethical norms of behavior. However, it is to be noted that human nature *per se* is not normative. Ethical normativity arises from rational interpretation of humanity. In our existence as human beings who participate in public discourse in our respective societies, we are always to remember the undeniable elements of subjectivity and objectivity in our views.

Reconciling Subjectivity and Objectivity in Public Ethical Discourse

Understanding the diverse nature of the societies we live in calls for an open disposition and a willingness to engage beyond our religious, cultural, and ideological borders. This engagement is an intellectual discourse which relates to public or social life. Some personal distance is overcome when one understands another person's worldview. The philosopher, Paul Ricoeur, whose work is analyzed below, shows how

subjectivity and objectivity are related in history and ethics. Religions and ethics converge on the fact that they are all concerned with the human person. An analysis of human nature as variously understood in world religions is a way of overcoming religious sectarianism and also the point of convergence in ethical and public discourse.

People generally learn from, and are shaped, by their experiences. History comprises events performed and affecting human beings and their worldviews. Human knowledge is an historical event. As human persons, we understand our identity through historical consciousness. Moral reasoning and action are not isolated from historical knowledge because new knowledge brings with it new ethical issues. For example, the development of medical technology and research has led to reevaluation of what constitutes ordinary and extraordinary means of life-preservation in contemporary bio-medical ethics. Research into any society's traditional social-political structures provides ways to respond to various human concerns in the world today. Human living has its conceptualization and signification in a historical context which includes culture, religion, philosophy, politics, and all other aspects affecting daily human living. As people, we gain understanding or meaning through historically-shaped concepts.

Historical knowledge is also concerned with ways to appraise and find solutions to the present issues. Social sciences are also useful to ethics since they provide the necessary tools for research and data needed in ethical argumentation. The study of ethics, therefore, needs continuous updating through intellectual discourse informed by the changed or changing historical circumstances. From an emphasis on the contextualization of ethics arises the issue of relativity. Does it mean because people have different histories and cultures there is no common element in ethical considerations? The work of ethics scholars has benefited from the research findings in other disciplines such as history, biotechnology, anthropology and other social and natural sciences. The incorporation of other academic disciplines, cultures, and religion in ethics leads to its relevance in a social context. This also helps overcome the problem of generalization of ethical norms. It is also notable that people borrow cultural practices from others. For example, Kwame Anthony Appiah notes the European cosmopolitanism has been receptive to art and literature from other places and a wider interest in lives elsewhere. According to Appiah, there is "the recognition that human beings are different and that we learn from each other's differences."²⁰

Paul Ricoeur's analysis of historical knowledge is applicable here in demonstrating the relational nature of ethics and in a special way in public ethical discourse. He relates the subjectivity of history and ethics to the historical quest for objectivity. Public discourse generally aims at reaching a common ground. Ricoeur shows a similar process happens in history where a person tries to move from subjectivity of their

individuality to the shared objectivity with other persons. He extensively argues it is possible to reconcile subjectivity and objectivity in human history and ethical discourse. This can be interpreted as advocating a relation between cultural particularity (subjectivity) and the pursuit of objective moral or ethical norms. Referring to the contribution of historians to philosophy and other disciplines, Ricoeur categorically asserts:

...we expect the historian to have a certain quality of subjectivity, not just any subjectivity but one which is precisely suited to the objectivity proper to history. It is a question, therefore, of an implied subjectivity, one that is implied by the expected objectivity. Thus we have a feeling that there is good and bad subjectivity and we expect the very exercise of the historian's craft to decide between them.²¹

From Ricoeur we can argue relativity is not necessarily irreconcilable with objectivity. From a cultural-historical context people can proceed to understand other cultural-historical contexts, and thereby achieve an objective consensus. Ricoeur also notes, "Subjectivity is not a prison and objectivity is not our liberation from this prison. Far from conflicting, subjectivity and objectivity reinforce each other."²²

Further, Ricoeur argues "The historian is led to discover that the *object* of history is always the human *subject*."²³ There is subjectivity in any intellectual pursuit. It is 'I' as 'this person' from a certain historical background who is reading this paper. As human beings, we are subjects before we can engage in any activity that involves us as persons. In its concerns, ethics, like history, is about people. People are always individual persons or subjects. Individuality implies subjectivity. The studies of history and ethics are concerned with subjectivity. Ricoeur elaborates what he means by subjectivity as follows:

We expect history to be a history of men, one which helps the reader who is instructed by the historian's history to achieve a high level of subjectivity—not just personal subjectivity but that which is proper to mankind. However, this interest or expectation of a passage from myself to man—by means of history—is no longer exactly epistemological but properly philosophical.²⁴

Hence, Ricoeur views history as "...a form of knowledge only through the relation it establishes between the lived experience of people of other times and today's historian."²⁵ There is no history without people who

understand events of the past through their present events. Hence, historical knowledge possesses a relational nature.

Ricoeur, however, holds that history is never wholly captured by the historian: “No “master conception,” moreover, can encompass the whole of history. An epoch is still a product of analysis. History will never propose to our understanding anything more than “total parts” (in the words of Leibniz), that is, “analytic syntheses” (which is a bold expression from Kant’s “Transcendental Deduction”).”²⁶ The same can be said of ethics as unable to capture all the implications of all ethical decisions. This brings to mind the problem of ethical indeterminacy,²⁷ where there is an acknowledgement of something unknown in any ethical judgment. History is a sector of intersubjectivity:

History may therefore be looked upon as an extensive development of meaning and as an irradiation of meanings from a multiplicity of organizing centers. No man who is immersed in history, however, can arrange the total meaning of those radiated meanings. Every “narrative” shares in the two aspects of meaning; as a composite unity it counts on the whole order in which the events become unified; as a dramatized narration it runs from episode to episode, from climax to climax.²⁸

Ethics and history remain always open to the determinations of human reasoning and activity. Of incompleteness of history, Ricoeur notes, “...the consciousness of an era, which the historian tries to reconstruct within his most far-reaching syntheses, is nourished by all the interactions and varied relations he has won through analysis.”²⁹ Additionally, Ricoeur refers to the problem peculiar to the historian who depends on certain features of incomplete objectivity. He notes four features of incomplete objectivity:

1. A historian not only chooses rationality but also notes the “other kind of choice [which] stems from what could be called the judgment of importance in that it presides over the selection of events and factors.”³⁰ Ricoeur argues that history is shaped by what people judge or see as important but this judgment is without criterion.
2. There is subjectivity in history because it is “...dependent in varying degrees upon a popular conception of causality.”³¹ What people see as important aspects of their lives are also viewed as the determinant factors of what is historical or significant.
3. Historical distance determines ‘the how and what’ people understand. “An additional feature of this incomplete objectivity stems from what could be called the phenomenon

of “historical distance.” To understand rationality is to attempt to recognize or identify (Kant called intellectual synthesis the synthesis of recognition in concept).”³²

4. Ricoeur also refers to the problem of history whose subject is man and thereby the fact that the ‘other’ is a different man. “For what the historian attempts to restore through the whole network of causal relations is precisely what other men have experienced.”³³

In addition, Ricoeur also deals with the problem of personal identity and narrative identity when he states: “A triad has thus imposed itself on my analysis: describe, narrate, prescribe—each moment of the triad implying a specific relation between the constitution of action and the constitution of the self.”³⁴ Ricoeur notes there is a problem in the rejection or downgrading of narrative as historical knowledge. He states:

The case against narrative is thus that against the event. On the other hand, before the development of narratology in the linguistic and semiotic sphere, narrative was taken to be a primitive form of discourse, both tied up with tradition, legend, folklore, and finally myth, and too little to be worthy of passing the multiple tests that mark the epistemological break between traditional and modern history. In truth, these two orders of consideration go hand in hand—an impoverished concept of event goes along with an impoverished concept of narrative. Hence the trial of the event renders superfluous a distinct trial of narrative.³⁵

Previously, Ricoeur had also argued that “a history of events, a *histoire événementielle*, can only be a narrative history. Political history, a history of events, and narrative history are taken consequently as almost synonymous expressions.”³⁶

Ricoeur’s ideas provide a framework where ethics, as is the case with personal identity, is always open to further determination. The continuous process of acquiring objectivity or subjectivity means the search for ‘truth’ is always open to discourse. If history based on false subjectivity can also fail to be objective, then the quest for true objectivity has to remain open. Is it justifiable for anyone to claim to possess objective (or universal) ethical truth? The absoluteness of ethical norms can be questioned since the ethical decision, as argued from Ricoeur’s perspective, can also suffer a false subjectivity as is possible in the study of history. However, Ricoeur also argues good subjectivity leads to good objectivity since “The philosopher has a specific way of fulfilling in himself the historian’s work. This consists in making his own “self-discovery” coincide with a

“recovery” of history.”³⁷ Hence, subjectivity and objectivity are relational processes.

Further, Ricoeur argues “...the philosopher supposes that history is endowed with its properly human quality through the emergence and promotion of values which the philosopher can go back to and understand as a development of consciousness.”³⁸ He connects history, philosophy, and ethics. He notes: “The “direct” path of self-knowledge and the “indirect” path of the history of consciousness coincide. I have need of history in order to get out of my private subjectivity and to experience in and beyond myself the *being-man*, the *Menschsein*.”³⁹ The preceding, according to Ricoeur, “...presupposes that the coincidence of the meaning of my consciousness and the meaning of history is possible,”⁴⁰ and thereby the possibility of objectivity: “Moreover, the historian who reflects on his own situation within the whole sphere of mankind is led to look upon the history he practices as included in the over-all communication of minds.”⁴¹

From the above, we can surmise that good ethical reasoning is informed by good historical subjectivity and objectivity. To deny the existence of human subjectivity would be tantamount to denying the possibility of ethics and historical meaning. Subjectivity and objectivity, especially in ethics, have to be viewed as mutually inclusive. Good subjectivity, therefore, is connected to good objectivity, and vice versa. There is a possibility for religions to promote a good historical subjectivity for their members. Many religions claim to provide a path for human self-awareness and development to full humanity. Religious consciousness is also human consciousness. Objectivity and subjectivity whether in ethics or history points to the necessity of being able to dialogue from particular contexts to shared contexts. Objectivity is not based on one person’s thought but it entails listening to many voices in a city, nation, religions, academies, and professions. This means diverse societies, through discernment of shared worldviews, can dialogue and find solution to issues of human concern. Religious dialogue leads also to understanding shared human concerns. In a practical way, if objective ethics is possible then it should not exclude anyone or any views but it is to include all people or multiplicity of views from all areas of the world. Furthermore, ethical norms should not be the creation of one scholar or a few people but it is somehow a work ‘by the people and for the people.’

Concluding Remarks

Ricoeur’s attempt to reconcile subjectivity and objectivity in history is applicable to cultural and religious subjectivity in a society. Any cultural or religious group is a subjective entity. Subjectivity refers to not only individual personal uniqueness but also to cultural particularity. By culture is meant a people’s way of life in a historical context. All cultural

distinctions point to the subjective ways members of specific groups conduct their lives. Culture gives people an identity. It shapes how people interact with one another and their environment. Human beings are cultural and historical beings. However, people are not victims of culture but moral and intellectual subjects who make or create culture. Culture is viewed here as philosophy lived and celebrated in a society.⁴² “Culture is an open-ended resource of social meanings on which members of a community draw to mediate the contingencies of their everyday life.”⁴³ Peter Coetzee has argued there is a correlation between culture and reason since social practice holds rationality to a context and that a tradition is “a coherent system of thought.”⁴⁴ Human beings as ethical subjects are always situated in cultural settings and this radically shapes the understanding and the development of the ethical process. It should be emphasized here that culture is also a product of human reasoning.

Further, culture shapes the individual’s decision-making process. People develop basic ethical principles which are culturally conditioned and act as the basis for ethical reasoning. Ethical norms are a product of a people’s culture and history. For example, life-preservation whether in oneself or another is an ethical principle. Basically, ethics deals with rational judgment in human conduct. An understanding of ethical principles as basic is connected with a claim of their universality. An ethical theory, such as the natural law theory, which claims universality, is also limited by its Western cultural-philosophical specificity. Anyone who claims to have developed an ethical theory that applies equally to all people will encounter some cultural ambiguities. For example, in some cultures stealing was forbidden only within one’s clan or tribe but not from people outside the group.

Nevertheless, connecting culture and human reasoning provides a basis for arguing for the particularity of ethical discourse as well as the possibility of some ethical principles which are trans-cultural. For example, Wiredu uses the biological nature of human beings, language, and communication between people of diverse backgrounds to argue for cultural universals among peoples in the world.⁴⁵ Some cultural practices are derived from a rational consideration of certain facts of life. But the claim to universality of ethical principles has been criticized as a way of extending domination over others. Michael Von Brück has summed the problem of cultural domination in the contemporary world thus: “There is no clash of civilizations, but a struggle for economic, political, and cultural justice on the one hand and the drive to extend economic and cultural domination by the powerful on the other hand.”⁴⁶ The preceding is a problem dealt with especially in post-colonial studies.

All religions have their particularities and are undeniably limited to the people who espouse them. It is people who believe and have their lives guided by their religion. Religion fosters a people’s understanding of themselves and how they interact with the world. All religions have an

ethical dimension. Further, religions are part of the history and culture of a majority of people in various parts of the world.⁴⁷ Since religion shapes its adherents' self-understanding, it also provides a way to contextualize ethics. Religions such as Judaism, Islam, Christianity and others, have particular ways of conceiving human nature and the world. In Judaism and Christianity, humanity is understood as created by God in his image (Gen. 1:26-27), and this leads to the teaching on the exalted nature of the human person. Human beings are viewed as possessing dignity that calls for the utmost respect. On the other hand, Islam also teaches that the human person has an elevated nature above all other created beings. In Islam, human beings are believed as created by God in order to represent him on earth, and hence Islam requires human responsibility in all earthly endeavors.

This essay concludes that since religions are a reality in our contemporary world, we cannot deny they play a major part in shaping ethics. Religions are viewed as possessing an inherent responsibility which calls their members to participate positively in public discourse today. To do this, religions have to avoid the obstacle of sectarianism. I have proposed a recovering of the *humanum* (human element) in world religions and the religio-cultural nature of any society today. An appreciation of religious and cultural diversity makes a more cohesive society possible. If I truly understand myself as a human person, chances are I will see the same humanity in another person. A proper understanding of the human person is the foundation of ethics. Ultimately, a good ethical analysis requires an informed philosophical reflection which includes history, culture, and religion. It includes people participating in public discourse as they are.

Notes:

¹ Cf. Flaviu Călin Rus, Anișoara Pavelea, Mihai Deac, Paul Fărcaș, "Media Coverage of Politicians' in Religious Events," *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, vol. 10, no. 29 (Summer 2011): 132-158.

² St. Thomas Aquinas, "Summa Theologiae I-II, Question 91, Article 2," in *An Introduction to St. Thomas Aquinas*, ed. and trans. by Anton C. Pegis (New York: The Modern Library, 1948), 617-619.

³ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. and ed. by M. Gregor (New York: Cambridge University, 1998), 14-15.

⁴ Cf. David Little and Sumner B. Twiss, *Comparative Religious Ethics* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), 117-118, where they argue religious ethics is different from other systems of ethics.

⁵ Hans Küng, *A Global Ethic for Global Politics and Economics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 114-121.

⁶ David Novak, "The Universality of Jewish Ethics: A Rejoinder to Secularist Critics," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 36 (June 2008): 181-211.

⁷ Kwasi Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1996), 46.

⁸ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame, 1981), 64-69. On the social dimension of ethics and human rights, see Kwame Anthony Appiah's comment on John Stuart Mill's conception of happiness: "To value individuality properly just is to acknowledge the dependence of the good for each of us on relationships with others." [*Ethics of Identity* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005), 21].

⁹ Michael Von Brück, "A Ethics of Justice in a Cross-Cultural Context," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 26 (2006): 64.

¹⁰ Harold Coward, "Self as Individual and Collective: Ethical Implications." in *Visions of a New Earth: Religious Perspectives on Population, Consumption, and Ecology*, ed. H. Coward (Albany: State University of New York, 2000), 43.

¹¹ Klaus K. Klostermaier, "The Life-Ethics of the *Bhagavadgītā* as Interpreted by *Rāmānuja*," in *Life Ethics in World Religions*, University of Manitoba Studies in Religion 3, ed. D. McCance (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars, 1998), 63. Cf. on the conflict between indigenous traditions with human rights as presented in the West, see Sumner B. Twiss, "Religion and Human Rights: A Comparative Perspective." in *Explorations in Global Ethics: Comparative Religious Ethics and Interreligious Dialogue*, ed. S. Twiss (Boulder, Colorado: Westview, 1998), 155-175 especially at p. 168.

¹² Harold Coward, "Self as Individual and Collective: Ethical Implications," 43.

¹³ Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984), 199-217.

¹⁴ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2nd Edition (Oxford: Heinemann, 1990), 209.

¹⁵ Bénédet Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethics: Beyond the Universal Claims of Western Morality*, trans. Brian McNeil (New York: Crossroad, 2001), 4. See also by Bujo, *Utamadunisho na Kanisa La Mazingira* (Nairobi: Pauline, 1999), 9.

¹⁶ Twiss, "Religion and Human Rights: A Comparative Perspective," 165.

¹⁷ Alan Gewirth, *Human Rights: Essays on Justification and Application* (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1982), 4.

¹⁸ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University, 1989), 6-7.

¹⁹ William Schweiker, "Religious Ethics," in *The Blackwell Companion to Religious Ethics*, ed. W. Schweiker (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 4-5.

²⁰ Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), 4.

²¹ Paul Ricoeur, *History and Truth*, trans. C. Kelbley (Evanston: Northwestern University, 1965), 22.

²² Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Volume 1, trans. K. McLaughlin (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1984), 98.

²³ Charles Kelbley, "Introduction," in Ricoeur, *History and Truth*, xiv. See also Pamela Anderson, "Re-reading Myth in Philosophy: Hegel, Ricoeur and Irigaray Reading Antigone," in *Paul Ricoeur and Narrative Context and Contestation*, ed. M. Joy (Calgary: University of Calgary, 1997), 51-68. Anderson refers to myth in Ricoeur's work as history because it concerns people.

²⁴ Ricoeur, *History and Truth*, 22. For more analysis on history and narrative as concerning human beings, see David Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1986). Carr notes, "Narratives, whether historical or fictional, are typically about, and thus purport to represent, not the

world as such, reality as a whole, but specifically human reality” (p. 19). Further, “...what stories and histories represent or depict is not purely physical events but human experiences, actions, and sufferings, including human activity of projecting meaning onto or finding meaning in physical and other events” (p. 20).

²⁵ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 99.

²⁶ Ricoeur, *History and Truth*, 25.

²⁷ Mary I. Bockover, “Ethics, Relativism, and the Self,” in *Culture and Self: Philosophical and Religious Perspectives, East and West*, ed. D. Allen (Boulder, Colorado: Westview, 1997), 43.

²⁸ Ricoeur, *History and Truth*, 39.

²⁹ Ricoeur, *History and Truth*, 24.

³⁰ Ricoeur, *History and Truth*, 26.

³¹ Ricoeur, *History and Truth*, 26.

³² Ricoeur, *History and Truth*, 27.

³³ Ricoeur, *History and Truth*, 28.

³⁴ Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. K. Blamey (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1994), 114-15. See also Henderikus J. Stam and Lori Egger, “Narration and Life: On the Possibilities of and Narrative Psychology,” in *Paul Ricoeur and Narrative Context and Contestation*, ed. M. Joy (Calgary: University of Calgary, 1997), 69-85.

³⁵ Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 2004), 239.

³⁶ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 101.

³⁷ Ricoeur, *History and Truth*, 32.

³⁸ Ricoeur, *History and Truth*, 34.

³⁹ Ricoeur, *History and Truth*, 33.

⁴⁰ Ricoeur, *History and Truth*, 34.

⁴¹ Ricoeur, *History and Truth*, 37.

⁴² Okot p'Bitek, “The Sociality of Self,” in *African Philosophy: An Anthology*, ed. E. Chukwudi Eze (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998), 73.

⁴³ Peter H. Coetzee, “Particularity in morality and its relation to community,” in *The African Philosophy Reader*, 2nd Edition, ed. P. Coetzee (New York: Routledge, 2003), 274.

⁴⁴ Peter H. Coetzee, 278.

⁴⁵ Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective*, 13-33.

⁴⁶ Von Brück, “A Ethics of Justice in a Cross-Cultural Context,” 62. See also how Mudimbe describes Christian revelation as a political performance in Africa. Mudimbe presents missionary effort to have worked to replace African traditional religions and other socio-political structures [V. Y. Mudimbe, *Parables and Fables: Exegesis, Textuality, and Politics in Central Africa* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin, 1991), 3-31].

⁴⁷ For example, Nathan Tierney suggests: “The world’s religions must become involved in peace building much more actively than they have so far. Christians, Muslims, and Hindus alone make up 70 per cent of the world’s population” [“Religion, the Globalization of War, and Restorative Justice,” in *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 26 (2006): 85].

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