

Doing Christian Ethics from the Margins

Miguel A. De La Torre

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CHAPTER 1

Doing Christian Ethics

Even the wicked are virtuous. The Ku Klux Klan, probably the oldest hate group in the United States, bases its beliefs and actions upon what it perceives to be Christian values and virtues. According to its official web site:

The Knights' Party is a political organization and believes we rightfully place our foundation upon the word of Jesus Christ. This we feel is what made America great. . . . It is only by basing governmental policy and laws upon the Christian faith that our nation and people will retain our cherished liberties and freedom. Our nation must repent of its sins and return to the laws of God and the precepts which made America Great!¹

Likewise, the Church of the Creator, one of the newest and fastest-growing hate groups, operates according to its own code of ethics. But unlike the Klan, it is constructed as a non-Christian organization. According to its official web page:

Christianity teaches love your enemies and hate your own kind, while we teach exactly the opposite, namely hate and destroy your enemies and love your own kind. Whereas Christianity's teachings are suicidal, our creed brings out the best creative and constructive forces inherent to the White Race. Whereas Christians are destroyers, we are builders. . . . Our

¹ See <http://www.kukluxklan.org>

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Golden Rule briefly can be summarized as follows: That which is good for the White Race is the highest virtue; that which is bad for the White Race is the ultimate sin.²

In all fairness, hate groups such as these advocate motherhood, patriotism, and the welfare of children. They exhort their members to live by a code of ethics that celebrates and defends values and virtues that some of the world's great faith traditions also advocate. It would be somewhat reductionist simply to write off these groups as purely evil with no comprehension of good. In fact, as these two web sites indicate, they do have a set of ethics, a sense of proper behavior, and a self-imposed mandate to live an honorable life, hence proving St. Augustine of Hippo's dictum that "there is a kind of honor even among thieves."

The problem with the value systems of the KKK and the Church of the Creator is that others, among them people of color, disagree with their understanding of morality. The issue then is not so much *whether* humans should follow some set of ethical precepts, but rather, *which* ethical precepts. Moral relativism recognizes the variety of ethical beliefs existing between different racial and ethnic groups, economic classes, and gender preferences. But if ethics is simply relative, where no one group's ethics is necessarily superior or inferior to another group's, then adhering to the ethics spouted by the Klan, or the Church of the Creator, should be as valid as any ethics coming from the marginalized spaces of society, or any other spaces for that matter. It appears as though a preferential option needs to be made for some set of ethical precepts. The question is: Whose?

While the Klan or the Church of the Creator may appear as extreme examples, other ethical perspectives expounded by many Christians within the U.S. eurocentric culture also raise questions and concerns about the incongruence existing with what they conceive to be moral and day-to-day experiences of marginalized people. Regardless of the virtues expounded by the dominant culture, there still exist self-perpetuating mechanisms of oppression that continue to normalize and legitimize how subjugation manifests itself in the overall customs, language, traditions, values, and laws

² See <http://www.creator.org/faq>

of the United States. Our political systems, our policing authorities, our judicial institutions, and our military forces conspire to maintain a status quo designed to secure and protect the power and wealth of the privileged few. In some cases, the ethics advanced by the dominant culture appears to rationalize these present power structures, hence protecting and masking the political and economic interests of those whom the structures privilege—in effect, an ethics driven by the self-interest of Euroamericans.

As long as the religious leaders and scholars of the dominant culture continue to construct ethical perspectives from within their cultural space of wealth and power, the marginalized will need an alternate format by which to deliberate and, more importantly, do ethics. Through critical social analysis, it is possible to uncover the connection existing between the prevailing ideologies (namely, the ethics of the dominant culture) that support the present power arrangement, with the political, economic, and cultural components of the mechanisms of oppression that protect their power and wealth. Anchoring ethics on the everyday experience of the marginalized challenges the validity, or lack thereof, of prevailing ideologies that inform eurocentric ethics.

For example, the fact that once upon a time in U.S. history the “peculiar” institution of slavery was biblically supported, religiously justified, spiritually legitimized, and ethically normalized raises serious questions concerning the objectivity of any particular code of ethics originating from that dominant white culture. At the very least, the marginalized are suspicious of the ethics of those who benefit from what society deems to be Christian or moral—then, as well as today. Although hindsight facilitates our understanding of how unchristian and unethical previous generations may have been, we are left wondering whether perspectives considered by some to be morally sound today might be defined as unchristian and unethical by future generations. Regardless, extreme groups like the Klan or the Church of the Creator are not, nor should they be, our focus. Instead, our concentration rests with ethics advocated by traditionally based Christian congregations found throughout this country.

I aim to describe how the disenfranchised struggle against societal mechanisms responsible for much of the misery they face, preventing them from living out the mission of Christ as recorded in

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the Gospel of John: “that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (10:10).³ Christian liberationist ethics becomes the process by which the mechanisms that dehumanize life, as well as cause death, are dismantled. All too often, ethics, as presented by the dominant culture, explores Christian virtues without seriously considering the existence of the oppressed majority of people. The hope of God, like the hope of the marginalized, is the re-creation of proper relationships where all people can live full abundant lives, able to become all that God has called them to be, free from the societal forces (racism, classism, and sexism) that foster dehumanizing conditions. Within such relationships exist healing, wholeness, and liberation.

WHY CHRISTIAN?

One may ask why this book unapologetically centers ethical reflection upon the Christian perspective, relying mainly on Christian sacred texts (specifically the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament) and Christian theological concepts (specifically the liberationist motif advocated by many marginalized groups). Should not ethical perspectives incorporate a wide variety of responses, including those that are not necessarily Christian-based? Realizing the absence of a homogeneous cultural and religious center upon which to deduct moral reasoning, does it not make sense to reflect the world’s religious diversity when determining proper ethical responses? Surely there is much to learn about ethical deliberation from major world religions like Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, and

³ The reader should be aware that all scriptural quotes are the translation by the author from the original Hebrew or Greek. Additionally, it will be assumed that the stories and traditions appearing in the biblical text have been accurately preserved by the early faith communities. Usually, biblical scholars discuss the authenticity of authorship, as well as the accuracy of particular events, stories, or statements appearing in the text; however, such an analytical endeavor is beyond the scope of this book. Instead, my use of scripture attempts to read the text from the perspective of the faith community. Such a reading is conducted from the marginalized spaces of society, attempting to understand and apply the biblical message to the reality of disenfranchisement.

Buddhism, as well as overlooked earth-based religions from Africa, Australia, and the pre-European Americas. As worthy as such an exploration of comparative religious traditions may be, it is beyond the scope of this book.

Ethics remains a reflection of the social location and theological beliefs (or disbeliefs) of a given people. We focus on the Christian perspective because this book is written by and for those who claim to be followers of Jesus Christ. Although ethics can be done devoid of Jesus Christ (as well as devoid of the influence of a supreme god-type deity), such ethics, although valid for those constructing it, is not necessarily Christian-based, even though agreement may be found in several areas of deliberation.

That being said, it is crucial to realize that the “Christianity” upon which the ethical perspectives of this book are based, is not necessarily Christianity as defined and understood by those privileged by the dominant culture. Rather, it is Christianity as forged from the underside of the dominant culture, by those who exist on the margins of society. For those who struggle within oppressive structures, the personhood of Jesus Christ as a source of strength becomes crucial. The life and sayings of Christ, as recognized by the faith community that searches the biblical text for guidance to life’s ethical dilemmas, serve as the ultimate standard of morality. While eurocentric theology, and the ethics that flow from it, has a tendency to abstract the Christ event, those on the margins recognize that Christ remains at work in the United States today.

Theologian James Cone reminds us that it is from within the oppressed black community (and I would add any oppressed community) that Christ continues to bring about liberation from oppressive structures (1999a:5). For this reason, Jesus Christ, as understood by the disenfranchised faith community, becomes authoritative in how ethics develops within marginalized groups. For them, the incarnation—the Word taking flesh and dwelling among us—becomes the lens through which God’s character is understood. Although Christ remains the ultimate revelation of God’s character to humanity, the biblical text becomes the primary witness of this revelation and, as such, forms Christian identity while informing moral actions. The ultimate values advocated by the revelation of God through Christ as witnessed in the biblical text become the standards by which individuals and, more important,

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social structures are judged. Regardless of how many different ways the biblical text can be interpreted, certain recurring themes, specifically a call to justice and a call to love, can be recognized by all who call themselves Christians.

WHY ETHICS?

Neither the overall biblical text, nor the pronouncements of Jesus are silent or abstruse concerning the type of actions or praxis expected of those who claim to be disciples of Christ. The prophets of old would answer the ethical question of what God wants of God's people in a very straightforward matter. God was not interested in church services devoid of praxis toward the marginalized. As the prophet Isaiah reminds us, "Do not bring me [your God] your worthless offerings, the incense is an abomination to me. I cannot endure new moon and Sabbath, the call to meetings and the evil assembly" (1:13). Instead, the prophets proclaimed justice for society's most vulnerable members as true worship, a testimony of one's love for God and neighbor.

Jesus sounds an eschatological admonishment on what is expected from his followers. In the Gospel of Matthew, he warns, "Because lawlessness shall have been multiplied, and the love of many will grow cold, the one enduring to the end, this one will be saved" (24:12–13). In short, there can be no faith, in fact no salvation, without ethical praxis — not because such actions are the cause of salvation, but rather their manifestation. To participate in ethical praxis is to seek justice. For those on the margins of society, the ultimate goal of any ethical praxis is to establish a more just society. Yet justice has become a worn-out, hollow expression — an abstract and detached battle cry. Every political action initiated by the dominant culture, no matter how self-serving, is construed as just. The maintenance of an economic system that produces poverty is heralded as being based on the just principle of *sum cuique tribuere* (to each what is due). Sending military personnel into battle to protect "our" natural overseas resources is understood as securing our freedoms and way of life. The most unjust acts are portrayed as just by those with the power and privilege to impose their worldview on the rest of society. This is what sociologist Emile Durkheim meant when he insisted that the beliefs

and sentiments held in common by the inhabitants of the dominant culture become the moral norms codified in laws, customs, and traditions. Consequently, the primary function of society becomes the reaffirmation, protection, and perpetuation of this “collective or common conscience” (1933:79–82). If this is true, then those on the margins of society must ask if it is possible to formulate a universal principle of justice apart from the definitions imposed by the collective conscience of the dominant culture.

Two of the most important components of ethics are the concepts of justice and love, both rooted within the biblical narrative. Although these are two separate concepts, for the liberationist they are forever connected. The importance of justice to ethical living is expounded by biblical scholar Gerhard Von Rad, who writes:

There is absolutely no concept in the Old Testament with so central a significance for all the relationships of human life as that of “*tsedaqah*.” It is the standard not only for man’s relationship to God, but also for his relationship to his fellows, reaching right down to the most petty wrangling—indeed, it is even the standard for man’s relationship to the animals and to his natural environment. (1962:370)

Justice, the English equivalent of *tsedaqah*, can never be reduced simply to some ideal to be achieved or a code of precepts to be followed. Rather, justice denotes how a real relationship between two parties (God and human, human and human, nature and human, and/or human and society) is conducted. The emphasis is not on some abstract concept of how society is to organize itself, but rather on loyalty within relationships, specifically those dealing with humans (Von Rad 1962:371). Right relationship with God is possible only if people act justly toward each other.

Such relationships are prevented from securing an abundant life, here understood as intellectual, physical, and material development, when one party, in order to secure greater wealth and power, does so at the expense of the Other. Injustice thus becomes a perverted relationship that ignores coordinating the proper good or end of individuals with that of their community. Such perverted relationships insist that its members should pursue their own self-interest, for only then will it be capable of contributing to the over-

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all common good.⁴ Such thinking asserts that everyone has a moral obligation to follow self-interest so as to establish justice.⁵ Still, such an approach to relationships is fundamentally incongruent with how justice is defined in the biblical text, specifically Paul's admonition to put the needs of others before oneself (Eph. 5:21).

The danger of not incorporating the relational aspects of the term justice can lead to the rejection of God, even while one professes to belong to God and to live a pious life. Liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez reminds us:

To know Yahweh, which in biblical language is equivalent to saying to love Yahweh, is to establish just relationships among persons, it is to recognize the rights of the poor. The God of biblical revelation is known through interhuman justice. When justice does not exist, God is not known; God is absent. (1988:110–11)

If justice is what Christians are called to do, it is done in obedience to love. Love can never be understood or defined as an emotional experience (although such feelings could, and usually become a symptom of the love praxis). Neither is it a response due to pity nor a duty based on paternalism. Brazilian theologians Leonardo and Clodovis Boff remind us that “love is praxis, not theory” (1988:4). Love is an action verb that describes something that is done by one person to another, an action taken regardless of how one feels or, as the author of 1 John 3:18 stated, “Let us

⁴ For example, Adam Smith makes such an argument within the economic sphere in his 1776 book *The Wealth of Nations*.

⁵ Martin Buber best describes the consequences of such a perverted relationship. He writes that the I-You relationship is an intimate one consisting of caring, trust, and empowerment. In such relationships, participants discover their humanity and through mutual affirming discover the “eternal You.” By contrast, the I-It relationship (which some have argued is prevalent due to racism, classism, and sexism) dehumanizes the Other. By identifying them as a commodity to be possessed, exploited, and disposed at the will of the “I,” the “It” is oppressed while the “I” loses their essential humanity, creating a condition in need of liberation and salvation (1970:62, 84, 150, 160).

not love in words, nor in mere talk, but in deed and in truth.” Love is the deed of justice or, as the Medellín documents eloquently stated, “Love is the soul of justice. The Christianity which works for social justice should always cultivate peace and love in one’s heart” (CELAM 1968:71). For the Christian, this deed is done in spite of the Other deserving to be loved. Paul reminds us, “But God loved us by commanding Christ to die for us, even while we were still sinners” (Rom. 5:8). It is this same type of love that binds the believer to the abundant life of the Other. Hence, to love in this fashion is to question, analyze, challenge, and dismantle the social structures responsible for preventing people from reaching the fullest potential of the abundant life promised by Christ.

Love becomes the unifying theme of the biblical text, specifically when expressed as a relational love for God and for one’s neighbor. The false dichotomy existing between faith (love the Lord your God) and ethics (love your neighbor as yourself) is collapsed by Jesus, who demands manifestations of both by those wishing to be called his disciples. The doing of love becomes the new commandment Christians are called to observe (Jn. 12:34–35). The Apostle Paul understood how paramount Christ’s command was for all ethical actions committed by those calling themselves Jesus’ disciples. Hence he wrote to the Corinthians: “If I speak in the tongues of humans, even of angels, but I do not have love, I become as a sounding brass or clanging cymbal. And if I have prophecies, and know all mysteries, and all knowledge, and if I have all faith so as to move mountains, but I do not have love, I am nothing” (1 Cor. 13:1–3).

The love that liberates can only be known and experienced from within relationships established upon acts of justice. Relationships with each other, and God, become a source for moral guidance, capable of debunking the social structures erected and subsequently normalized by the dominant culture. By first learning to love humans through just relationships, the ability to love God also becomes possible. For as 1 John 4:20 reminds us, how can we love God whom we cannot see, unless we first learn to love humans whom we do see? It is love toward the least among us, demonstrated through a relationship founded on justice that manifests love for God. Only by loving the disenfranchised by seeing Jesus among the poor and weak, can one learn to love Jesus who claims

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to be the marginalized. To love the marginalized is to love Jesus, making fellowship with God possible as one enters into just fellowship with the disenfranchised.

In conclusion, the basis for all ethical acts can be reduced to one verse from Galatians: “The whole Law is fulfilled in one word, Love your neighbor as yourself” (5:14). How do we love our neighbor? We can look to the biblical narrative, seeking concrete examples of love manifested as an act of God’s work to create justice-based relationships. The very identity of those claiming to be Christian becomes defined by their relationship to their God and to their neighbor. To construct justice apart from a love relationship with others becomes a perversion designed to protect the privilege of the ones doing the construction. If, according to Luke 4:18, Jesus came to “proclaim liberation to the captives . . . [and] set those oppressed free,” how then can the bondage of many be preferred simply because it protects the power and privilege of the few? For this reason, an option for the poor characterizes a sincere commitment to justice, not because the poor are inherently more holy than the elite, but simply because they lack the elite’s power and privilege. Consequently, we must now ask, why then from the margins?

WHY FROM THE MARGINS?

If the dominant culture continues to be the sole interpreter of moral reality, then its perspectives will continue to be the norm by which the rest of society is morally judged. The danger is that, to some extent, the dominant culture’s ethics has historically been and, some would argue, continues to be, a moral theorizing geared to protect the self-interest of those who are privileged. Consequently, which ethical perspectives are chosen or discarded becomes a decision that establishes power relationships. To choose one ethical precept over another justifies those who will eventually benefit from what is chosen. Once members of the dominant culture recognize the ethical precepts that support their lifestyle, claims of moral absolutism can be made. When members of the dominant culture legitimize the values that advance their power within the social structures as moral “truths,” they fail to realize that at times the Christian ethics that they advocate in fact legitimize

power, specifically, who has it, and how it is to be used. This form of eurocentric moral imperialism forces serious consideration of the question asked by Argentinian theologian José Míguez Bonino: “In this world of power, of economic relations and structures, a world that maintains its autonomy and will not yield to voluntaristic moral ideals imposed from the outside, a world in which power and freedom seem to pull in opposite directions — what can Christians say and do?” (1983:21). For those who do ethics from the margins, the issue of power becomes paramount in the development of any ethical discourse. Foremost for those who are marginalized is the ethical response to the use, misuse, and abuse of power rather than issues of character, values, virtues, or moral principles.

Because the Judeo-Christian faith is based on the God of Exodus who can hear the cries for freedom from the marginalized and enters history to lead them toward liberation, any ethics arising from that faith that wishes to remain faithful to that religious tradition must remain rooted in the praxis of liberation. Christian ethics should first struggle with the question of power and how to crucify power and the privilege that comes with it so that justice and love can instead reign. Yet, if those who are privileged by the present political, economic, and social structures refuse to acknowledge that being wealthy and white provides specific advantages over against the disenfranchised, then how can they participate with integrity in any discourse that addresses injustices? For Christian ethics to be relevant, the faith community’s struggles with oppressive living conditions must be engaged, always with the goal of dismantling the mechanism responsible for creating the inhumanity faced within marginalized spaces.

Jesus can never belong to the oppressors of this world because he is one of the oppressed. The radicalness of the gospel message is that Jesus is in solidarity with the very least of humanity. The last shall be first, the center shall be the periphery. In Matthew 25:31–46, Christ returns to earth to judge between those destined for the reign of heaven and those who are not. The blessed and the cursed are separated by what they did or did not do to the least among us. Specifically, did they or did they not feed the hungry, welcome the alien, clothe the naked, and visit those infirm or incarcerated? Is the ethical lifestyle of individuals in solidarity with

the marginalized demonstrated in liberative acts that led others toward an abundant life? So that there would be no confusion about God's preferential option, Jesus clearly states, "Truly I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of these, the least of my people, you did it to me."

The church of Jesus Christ is called to identify and stand in solidarity with the oppressed. The act of solidarity becomes the litmus test of biblical fidelity and the paradigm used to analyze and judge how social structures contribute to or efface the exploitation of the marginalized. To be apart from the marginalized community of faith is to exile oneself from the possibility of hearing and discerning the gospel message of salvation — a salvation from the ideologies that masks power and privilege and the social structures responsible for their maintenance.

Ideologies and social structures are shaped and formed by individuals who are in turn shaped and formed by these same ideologies and social structures. Like everyone else, Christians are born into a society where the dialectical relation between the person and the community informs their beliefs and their character — in short, their identity. For this reason, the socio-historical context of any people profoundly contributes to the construction of their ethical system. When Christians, in accordance with their faith, attempt to develop ethical responses to the conflicts of human life, they participate in a dialogue between Christianity and what their community defines as Christian.⁶

⁶ H. R. Niebuhr was correct in observing that Christian ethics are fused and confused with what the civil social order determines is best for the common good. However, ethicist Darryl Trimiew calls H. R. Niebuhr to task for his underlying principle for Christian social action. According to Niebuhr, "Responsibility affirms: God is acting in all actions upon you. So respond to all actions upon you as to respond to his action" (1963:126). Niebuhr continues by claiming, "The will of God is what God does in all that nature and men do. . . . Will of God is present for Jesus in every event from the death of sparrows, the shining of sun and descent of rain, through the exercise of authority by ecclesiastical and political powers that abuse their authority, through treachery and desertion by disciples" (164–65). Trimiew finds Niebuhr's admonition troubling for marginalized communities because it encourages believers to interpret all actions, regard-

Unfortunately those who control the instruments of social power claim a monopoly on truth to the detriment of the disenfranchised. Black ethicist Katie Cannon succinctly captures the confusing of the dominant culture's self-interest with the interest of the public when she writes: "The welfare of the state is now fully identified with the interests of the wealthy class. Everything else is subordinate to the prosperity of the wealthiest business people and to the welfare of the commercial class as a whole. . . . Their control of taxation, judiciary, and the armed forces gives them free access to all political processes . . . the interest of the ruling class becomes de facto the interest of the public" (1995:150).

The common good becomes restricted to those who benefit from the privilege obtained within these same social structures. Yet seldom do those in power admit that they are disproportionately rewarded by society. Concealing this truth makes any ethics emanating from that same dominant culture incomplete and heretical. Appeals to Christianity or reason will fail to affect the existing power structures, for the dominant culture uses both to defend their interest. Thus, the disenfranchised can only bring liberative change through empowerment.⁷

The immoral hoarding of power and privilege by the dominant culture makes it difficult for those benefitting by the status quo to

less of how repressive such actions may be to the disenfranchised, as God's providence. Oppression becomes conformity to the will of God, who is chastising the marginalized for their sins. But how can any "responsible self," Trimiew wonders, claim that the death and misery faced by those marginalized at the expense of the privileged is God's providence? (1993:xi, 8).

⁷ Reinhold Niebuhr makes a similar point. He writes:

Dominant classes are always slowest to yield power because it is the source of privilege. As long as they hold it, they may dispense and share privilege, enjoying the moral pleasure of giving what does not belong to them and the practical advantage of withholding enough to preserve their eminence and superiority in society. . . . It must be taken for granted therefore that the injustices in society, which arise from class privileges, will not be abolished purely by moral persuasion. That is a conviction at which the proletarian class, which suffers most from social injustice, has finally arrived after centuries of disappointed hopes. (1960:121, 141)

be able to propose, with any integrity, liberative ethical precepts. For this reason, James H. Cone, as well as many other theologians of color, concludes that there can exist no theology (and I would add ethics) based on the gospel message that does not arise from marginalized communities (1999a:5). Francisco Moreno Rejón, a Latin American ethicist, maintains that for ethics to be liberative, its origins must rise:

1. *From the underside of history* and the world: from among the losers of history, from within the invaded cultures, from dependent [peoples] without genuine autonomy and suffering the manifold limitations that all this implies. 2. *From the outskirts of society*, where the victims of all manner of oppression live, the ones who “don’t count” — the ones whose faces reflect “the suffering features of Christ the Lord” (Puebla Final Document, no. 3). 3. *From among the masses of an oppressed, believing people*: it cannot be a matter of indifference to moral theology that the majority of Christians and humanity live in conditions of inhuman poverty. (1993:215)

Only from the margins of power and privilege can a fuller and more comprehensive understanding of the prevailing social structures be ascertained. Not because those on the margins are more astute, but rather because they know what it means to be a marginalized person attempting to survive within a social context designed to benefit the privileged few at their expense. Cone says it best when he writes, “Only those who do not know bondage existentially can speak of liberation ‘objectively.’ Only those who have not been in the ‘valley of death’ can sing the songs of Zion as if they are uninvolved” (1999b:22).

Is there any hope then for those who benefit from the present oppressive structures? Before answering this question, it must be realized that those who benefit from the current socio-political and economic structures are themselves oppressed. While not to the extent of intellectual, physical, and material deprivation felt in economically deprived areas, still, the oppressor lacks the full humanity offered by Christ. To oppress another is to oppress oneself. German philosopher Hegel’s concept of “Lordship and Bondage,” as found in his *The Phenomenology of Mind*, avers that

the master (the oppressor) is also subjugated to the structures he creates to enslave the laborer (1967:238–40). Because oppressive structures also prevent the master from obtaining an abundant life (specifically in the spiritual sense), those supposedly privileged by said structures are also in need of the gospel message of salvation and liberation.

Participation in ethical praxis designed to establish justice bestows dignity on the marginalized “non-persons” by accentuating their worth as receptacles of the *imago Dei*, the very image of God, but it also restores the humanity of the privileged who falsely construct their identity through the negation of the Other. According to psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, those from the dominant culture look into the mirror and recognize themselves as superior through the distancing process of negative self-definition: “I am what I am not.” The subject “I” is defined by contrasting it with the Objects residing on the margins. In the formation of the “I” out of the difference from the “them,” there exist established power relations that give meaning to those differences (1977:1–7). By projecting the “I” upon the marginalized, those of the dominant culture are able to define themselves as worthier of the benefits society has to offer, either because they are more industrious (the Protestant work ethic) or are simply wiser.

The ethical task before both those who are oppressed and those who are privileged by the present institutionalized structures is not to reverse roles or to share the role of privileged at the expense of some other group but, rather, to dismantle the very structures responsible for causing injustices along race, class, and gender lines, regardless of the attitudes bound to those structures. Only then can all within society, the marginalized as well as the privileged, can achieve their full humanity and become able to live the abundant life offered by Christ.

How then can those who are privileged by the present social structures find their own liberation from those structures, a liberation that can lead to their salvation? By nailing and crucifying one’s power and privilege to the cross so as to become nothing. According to the Apostle Paul’s letter to the Philippians, “[Jesus Christ], who subsisting in the form of God thought it not robbery to be equal with God, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, in the likeness of humans, and being found in the fashion of

a human, he humbled himself, becoming obedient until death, even the death of the cross" (2:6–8). At the cross, Jesus becomes nothing so as to redeem the world.

Ethics begins with our own surrender, with our self-negation. Those who benefit from the power and privilege of social structures can encounter the Absolute only through their own self-negation by crucifying their power and privilege. The late sixteenth-century mystic Juan de la Cruz (John of the Cross) captures this concept of self-negation in his *Ascent of Mount Carmel*: "To reach satisfaction in all, desire its possession in nothing. To come to the knowledge of all, desire the knowledge of nothing. To come to possess all, desire the possession of nothing. To arrive at being all, desire to be nothing" (1987:45).

Jesus was fond of saying, "For whoever desires to save their life shall lose it, but whoever loses their life for my sake and the sake of the gospel, that one shall save it" (Mk. 8:35). True liberation takes place when the individual sees into her or his own nature and thus becomes Christ-like. This praxis liberates those trapped by their race, class, and gender privilege, so that they, in solidarity with the marginalized, can bring about a just society based on the gospel definition of justice.

Still, which marginalized group will those from the dominant culture stand in solidarity with? Does each group create its own ethical reflection, or do they work together to overturn oppressive structures which affect all marginalized people? Darryl Trimiew, a black ethicist, has asked similar questions. He warns that:

The refusal of various liberation movements to concern themselves with the fates of others is the self-issued death warrant of these moral movements. This new universalism is daunting, as it will require the cooperation of strangers, even strangers who may be competing for the very same scarce resources. . . . Yet the tendency of liberationists to concern themselves with parochial interests cannot be underestimated. In this country alone, liberation ethicists show little interest in working together on projects of solidarity in order to overthrow common oppressions. (2004:Chap.8)

Unlike biblical interpretation, theology, or other religious disciplines, ethics should not be conducted from only one marginal-

ized perspective. Although black theology, Latina/o hermeneutics, and/or Asian-American Christian history provide unique and distinctive perspectives to different religious disciplines, ethics from just one marginalized perspective may prove counter-productive. Nuances between the different races and ethnicities exist and must be articulated in the overall conversation. Still, if the ultimate goal of ethics is to create a Christian response that brings change to existing oppressive structures, then no one group contains the critical mass required to bring about the desired just society. In fact, keeping marginalized groups separated insures and protects the power and privilege of the dominant culture.

When a front-page article in the *New York Times* (January 22, 2003) proclaimed, “Hispanics Now Largest Minority, Census Shows,” some Latino/as felt that they had finally come into their own, receiving long overdue recognition. Yet, an unspoken underlying message was being communicated to other marginalized groups, specifically African Americans: “Hispanics are now the top dog, so you are going to have to compete against them for resources.” But as Justo González perceptively observed, justice can never be served by having marginalized groups compete with each other for the meager resources doled out. For example, within churches, seminaries, church agencies, and church colleges, a small portion of the budget, a few positions, and a couple of courses are reserved for minorities, who are encouraged to fight among themselves for their small slice of the pie (1990b:36). These Christian institutions can now point at programs run, in spite of such limited resources, to herald their political correctness, all the while continuing institutionalized oppressive structures that secure the dominant culture’s privilege. In effect, marginalized groups are often prevented from working together to bring changes to these institutions.

This is not the first time the dominant culture has fostered division between marginalized groups to secure its power. In fact, this strategy is older than the nation. Thandeka, a professor of theology and culture, shows how Virginians in colonial America learned to better secure their power by forcing what could have been natural allies against their rule to compete against each other. The dominant culture succeeded in preventing allegiances from developing between two oppressed groups, slaves (blacks) and ex-indentured servants (poor whites), by endowing the latter with white

privilege. Prior to 1670, little difference existed between poor white indentured servants, considered “the scruff and scum of England,” and black slaves, considered possessions.⁸

As more slaves flooded the colonies, an economic shift developed from a white indentured servitude-based economy where the poor whites worked for a limited number of years, to a black slave-based economy where Africans, although costing twice as much as poor whites, worked, along with their progeny, for life. Fear of future rebellions and a changing economic base led the Virginia elite to pass legislation to create social divisions between blacks and poor whites in order to secure its privileged place in the emerging nation (Thandeka 1999:42–47). These laws effectively caused a division based on race between natural allies, a strategy that has continued to serve the privileged class well throughout this country’s history.⁹

Then, as now, the dominant culture’s privilege is maintained because different marginalized groups fight with limited resources for black justice, Latino/a justice, Amerindian justice, gender justice, Asian-American justice, and so on. Any intellectual resistance against injustice must include a concerted effort to eliminate the

⁸ Both the indentured servant and the slave lived an underfed and underclothed existence in separate inadequate quarters, supervised by overseers who would whip them as a form of correction. Both groups would run away from the oppression, while others, specifically freemen (former indentured servants who were without property) formed alliances to rebel. The most intense challenge to the status quo came in the form of the “Bacon’s Rebellion” of 1676, which ended with the burning to the ground of Jamestown. The last rebels to surrender were eighty slaves and twenty indentured servants.

⁹ In 1670 the Virginia Assembly forbade Africans and Amerindians from owning Christians (hereby understood as white) and non-Christians from Africa were to be slaves for life; in 1680, any white Christian was permitted to whip any black or slave who dared lift a hand in opposition to a Christian; in 1682, conversion to Christianity would not alter life-long slavery for Africans; in 1705, white indentured servants could not be whipped naked, only blacks who could also be dismembered for being unruly; also in 1705, all property (horses, cattle, and hogs) was confiscated from slaves and sold by the church so that the proceeds could be distributed among poor whites (Morgan 1975:329–33).

abuses of all oppressed groups. Although it is obvious that differences, particularly in cultural expressions, exist among numerous marginalized groups within the United States, a shared common history of disenfranchisement and the common problems of such a history create an opportunity to work together to dismantle oppressive structures that affect all who live on the periphery of power and privilege.

Ethics must be conducted from the overall margins of society more so than from any one particular marginalized perspective to avoid what Cornel West fears would be equating liberation with the white American middle-class man (1982:112). Although equal access to the socioeconomic resources of our society is desirable, the marginalized must stand vigilant of the danger of simply surmounting the present existing structures that cause oppression. Ethics is, and must remain, the dismantling of social mechanisms that benefit one group at the expense of another, regardless if the group privileged is white, black, brown, yellow, red, or any combination thereof. Not until separate marginalized groups begin to accompany each other toward justice, understood here as the dismantling of oppressive structures, can the hold of the dominant culture upon resources be effectively challenged.