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**ALL ETHICS IS SOCIAL ETHICS:
A FEMINIST, LIBERATIONIST, AND GLOBAL OPTIC**

CHRISTINA A. ASTORGA

All ethics is social ethics. While it has been convenient in the past to classify different areas of ethics, distinguishing social ethics from sexual ethics and bioethics, the lines of demarcation between what is personal and what is social in ethical issues and questions have been blurred. The dualism of personal and social ethics is a false one. All ethical issues have a social dimension. Sexual issues must be understood in their social roots, beyond their personal causes, in the light of a broader and larger view of these issues within society, its cultural values, economic and legal systems, and structures of power. Justice concerns are also integral to bioethics, beyond the principles of autonomy and informed consent relative to the patient-doctor relationship. In the twenty-first century context of globalization, bioethics must be in every case social ethics, not only in theory, but also in praxis. The narrative of bioethics must be so infused with the language of preferential option for the poor, common good, distributive justice, and solidarity.¹

The three parts of the talk are based on the three perspectives I propose for social ethics: feminist, liberationist, and global. In developing these perspectives, I present the critical discourses being engaged in each. In view of the feminist perspective, the multiplicity of women's experience and issues around embodiment and gender have critically shaped the discussion. With reference to the liberationist perspective, the preferential option for the poor, considered the "linchpin of liberation and its ethics" is a focus of controversy. Donal Dorr calls it the most controversial religious term since the Reformers' cry, "Salvation through faith alone."² In the light of the global perspective, there has been an ongoing debate between those who hold the reality and validity of a common morality or global ethics and those who hold a contrary view.

Feminist Perspective

The feminist perspective opened the theological enterprise to diversity and pluralism as it broke the boundaries of a consistently male theology. Feminism has influenced moral theology and ethics at a fundamental level by shaping its worldview and determining its method.

Multiplicity of Women's Experiences

While there is a common vision for feminism, the multiplicity of women's experience, has qualified the discourse. Gloria Schaab uses the image of the kaleidoscope, with "its symmetrical patterns from the fragments of the various materials, illuminated by a source of light," to illustrate vividly the diversity of

¹See Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Theological Bioethics: Participation, Justice, and Change* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2005).

²Donal Dorr, *The Option for the Poor and for the Earth* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2012), 7–8.

approaches, variety of sources, and complexity of norms relative to women's experience.³ She uses the term "women's experiences" in the plural rather than in the singular to signify a particularity of women's experiences that does not allow universalization or generalization. This is to give voice to the experiences of women in their different contexts beyond the white North American experience, to include black Americans, Latin Americans, Asians, numerous other groups representing various designations of theology, such as womanist and mujerista, and to recognize a variety of particularities based on social locations as defined by racial, ethnic, cultural, religious affiliations, and sexual orientations.⁴

Hispanic women, for example, often do not align with feminist views of equality in an individualist sense, because this is perceived as lessening the ties of women to their families and children.⁵ With the same orientation, Filipino women, in a family-centered society, privilege and prioritize their families in their life equation, many of them leaving their homes and families to seek jobs beyond their national borders. In the Philippines, as in the whole of Asia, women have surpassed the number of men working abroad. Often the primary income earners of their families, they bear the hopes and dreams for a better life for those dependent on them, yet they pursue these dreams in places where they may lose them even before they could create them. Poverty, migration, HIV/AIDS place the dreams and hopes of many at risk.⁶

Body and Gender as Social Constructions

Sexual ethics is about embodiment. To say the body is socially constructed means it is formed, influenced, and "shaped by the power dynamics in society."⁷ Any thought construct that breeds dualism and hierarchies is a product of these power dynamics, which yields political consequences that translate into socio-cultural structures of domination and subordination. Feminist ethicists writing on the social construction of the body propose that our understanding of the human body is a result of the social forces that shape our experiences and perceptions. The pejorative ideas and concepts of the past that considered female bodies inferior to those of men have cast a long and dark shadow on the construction of the meaning of the human body across cultures today, through the transport and hybridization of ideas and concepts.⁸

³Gloria L. Schaab, "Feminist Theological Methodology: Toward a Kaleidoscopic Model," *Theological Studies* 62 (2001): 34–65, at 342.

⁴Ibid., 348.

⁵See, for example, Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *En La Lucha= In the Struggle: Elaborating a Mujerista Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 34, 36.

⁶Christina A. Astorga, "The Feminization of AIDS in the Philippines," in Mary Jo Iozzio, Mary M. Doyle Roche and Elsie M. Miranda, eds., *Calling for Justice Throughout the World: Catholic Women Theologians on HIV/AIDS Pandemic*, (New York: Continuum, 2008), 157–66, at 162–63.

⁷Agnes M. Brazal and Andrea Lizares, eds., *Body and Spirituality: Theological-Pastoral Perspectives of Women in Asia* (Loyola Heights, Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2007), vii.

⁸Historical studies in gender identity and roles have yielded voluminous writings in the last half century. See for example, such studies as Rosemary Radford Ruether, ed., *Religion and Sexism* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1974); Mary Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975); Margaret Farley, "Sources of Inequality in the History of

An interesting article by A. Metti, “Bodily Representations of Hindu Goddesses: A Feminist Perspective,” illustrates this binary dualism in the perception of male and female bodies. A. Metti tells of a wedding celebration she attended that shook the very core of her being. She writes:

There was no semblance of any parity between the newlyweds: the bridegroom walked around majestically with his head held high, the bride followed her head bent. The bridegroom wore a simple suit, while the bride was bedecked with ornaments aplenty—chains, necklaces, nose rings, earrings, anklets, toe rings, bangles, tilak, and flowers. Her wedding garment was studded with precious stones and threads. She was a work of art and an object of male desire. But as a person, she was a “nobody,” a woman symbolically “chained” in marriage.⁹

In Indian culture, the representation of woman is tied up with the representation of the female body. Religious symbolism and imagery, literature and art through the centuries have created the image of woman as frail, without power and status, and her identity bound up with her physiological appearance and her relationship with man. The physical visual is important as the woman’s character and status are judged by her physique. In contrast, men are represented by their social status, intellect, achievements, and material prosperity.¹⁰

Sexologists and feminists writers in the 1960s and 1970s distinguished sex as a biological given from gender as a social construct. This distinction has now been blurred with the implication that sex is socially and culturally constructed as well. The constructed meaning of gender has been challenged because of the role differentiations that it promoted put women at a disadvantage.¹¹ I use an example narrated by Peter Henriot, to show how gender roles are constructed by social circumstances and role dynamics.

Women, by and large, work much harder than men—longer hours, double jobs. And expectations that this should be accepted as normal are deep in the culture. I commented once to a Zambian man that I was surprised and disturbed to see a largely pregnant woman walking along the road with a small baby on her back and another child clutching her right hand, carrying on her head one piece of luggage and in her left hand another, while her husband walked leisurely behind her carrying only a walking stick. I was told—with almost a straight face—that the man was protecting

Second Sex,” *Journal of Religion* 56 (April 1976):162–76; George Tavard, *Woman and the Christian Tradition* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1973); Barbara Hilkert Andolsen “Whose Sexuality? Whose Tradition? Women, Experience, and Roman Catholic Sexual Ethics,” in *Readings in Moral Theology*, no. 9: *Feminist Ethics and the Catholic Moral Tradition*, ed. Charles E. Curran, Margaret A. Farley, and Richard A. McCormick (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1996); Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submission: Spirituality, Philosophy, and Gender* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002).

⁹A. Metti, S.C.C., “Bodily Representations of Hindu Goddess: A Feminist Perspective,” in Brazal and Lizares, *Body and Sexuality*, 252–72, at 252.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Margaret A. Farley, *A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2008), 134. “Both the dimorphic paradigm for understanding sex, and the understanding of sex as biologically given rather than social constructed, are eroding. The most persuasive evidence of this is the scientific evidence, but the social evidence is also amassing.” Christine E. Gudorf, “Body, Self, and Sexual Identity,” in Brazal & Lizares, *Body and Sexuality*, 1–33, at 18.

his wife from the lions they might encounter. The fact that there had been no lions in this particular region for decades did not distract from the cultural imperative that men do not carry their wife's luggage in public, let alone look after children.¹²

The Philippine experience offers data on how cultural and power dynamics enter into the construction of the gender roles of women and men. In the pre-colonial era, before the rule of Spain in the Philippine for 400 years, the Filipina exercised domestic and social power. Marriages were arranged, and the dowry offered by the man to the parents of the bride, was a compensation for the loss of economic resource for the family which the woman was considered to be. When married, the woman kept her name, and if she came from a distinguished lineage, the husband took her name. So a man was identified for instance as the husband of Ninay or Isang.¹³ The spousal relationship was remarkably egalitarian, and the property that the man and woman brought to their marriage remained an individual possession.¹⁴

Reaping praises for her being a responsible wife and mother, and for her sagacity and innate managerial instincts, she exercised equal role with her husband in the economics of the family.¹⁵ To bear children or not was her choice.¹⁶ On this, and on many other family issues and concerns, she had a say. In difficult times, the woman showed a greater moral strength than her husband. "Gifted with sensible and affective temperament, the indian woman shows more tenacity and strength in the face of the necessitudes in life."¹⁷ The honored place of the woman in the pre-colonial Filipino family had its roots in the equal status of women and men in society. A daughter was as welcomed as a son, and both had equal opportunity for education.¹⁸ "The practice of primogeniture with regard to inheritance regardless of sex gives a good basis to suppose that firstborn women could succeed their fathers as rulers of tribes."¹⁹

There is ample evidence of women exercising power and leadership in the political field. This point, however, has been disputed because based on myths and legends, it was a contentious fact. But at that time when oral tradition was the way through which the world was viewed, these myths and legends were considered faithful mirrors of the conditions of society then.²⁰ It was told for instance that the consent of Queen Maniwantian, the wife of Datu Marikudo, had first to be secured before the lands could be sold by the Datu to the Bornean Malay immigrants led by

¹²Peter Henriot, "Grassroots Analysis: The Emphasis on Culture," in *Liberation Theologies on Shifting Grounds: A Clash of Socio-Economic and Cultural Paradigms*, ed. G. de Schrijver, 333–50 (Leuven: Leuven University Press), 346.

¹³C.F. Pedro Paterno, *La Antigua Civilizacion Tagalog* (Madrid: Tipografia de Manuel G. Fernandez, 1887), 244.

¹⁴Robert Fox, "The Philippines in Pre-HistoricTimes," in *Journal of History* 2 (n.d.), 457–58.

¹⁵Francisco Valdes, "El Archipelago Filipino: La Mujer Indigena," in *Ciudad de Dios* 24 (1891): 337.

¹⁶See Rajos Abella, et.al., *A Profile of Filipino Women* (Manila: PBSP, 1977), 14.

¹⁷Valdes, "El Archipelago Filipino: La Mujer Indigena," 334.

¹⁸Sr. Mary John Mananzan, "The Filipino Woman: Before and After the Spanish Conquest of the Philippines" in *Essays on Women*, ed. Mary John Mananzan, Women's Studies Series 1, 6–35 (Manila: The Institute of Women's Studies, St. Scholastica's College, 1987), 13.

¹⁹Ibid., 15.

²⁰Ibid., 14.

Datu Puti. There was a Queen Sima, who, according to tradition, ruled Cotabato in the seventh century with integrity, uprightness, and justice.²¹ But it was Princess Urduja of Pangasinan, about whom fascinating stories were woven into myths and legends. She was supposedly a beautiful amazon, who, skilled in the use of weapons, led an army of women who could fight as well as men on equal ground.²² In the religious field, the predominant role of women in pre-Spanish Filipino society is unquestioned. Permeating the whole life of a people, religion had a hold on their values and practices. And it was here where women were not only active participant—they had also leading roles.²³

The Filipino woman enjoying a singular status in the pre-Spanish society not shared by other women from other parts of the world at that time went through a radical change when the systematic colonization of the Philippines by Spain began in 1565. The Philippines became a colony of Spain for almost 400 years until 1898. Though the superiority of the *mujer indigena* could not be denied by the missionaries, they spared no effort in molding her to the image and likeness of the perfect woman of the Iberian society of their time.²⁴ The freedom of the woman in the pre-Spanish society, and the educational opportunities that she shared equally with men, were all curtailed, as the woman under the Spanish influence became a sheltered, over-protected, timid maiden who were confined to the church, kitchen, and children.²⁵

But the spirit of the *mujer indigena* in the Filipina could not be broken, and as it had happened again and again in history, especially during times of emergency and need, this spirit crushed bonds of confinement. There was Gabriela Silang who led the rebellion in Ilocos after the death of her husband at the hands of the Spanish authorities. In her fearless support for the revolutionaries, Melchora Aquino was hailed as the mother of the revolution. Wielding her bolo, Trinidad Tecson, another heroine, procured arms for the revolution. Gregoria de Jesus, a full-fledged member of the Katipunan, was a leading light in the underground revolutionary movement while Agueda Kahabagan, freedom fighter of Batangas, was a soldier who rose to the rank of general.²⁶ And of course, there was our beloved Cory Aquino, who undauntedly stood up to the Marcos regime, and whose prophetic witness led the Filipinos in the 1986 People Power Revolution which toppled the dictatorship without a single shot fired. Yes, again and again in history, the spirit of the *mujer indigena* has prevailed not only in these great women but in many valiant Filipino women, who are slugging it out everyday in the battlefield of life, in the war against poverty in a country where the very poor practically feed on the garbage of the rich, many of whom live in wanton extravagance.

²¹ Eufronio Alip, "The Barangay Through the Ages," *Journal of History*, 29 (1974): 24.

²² Gregorio Zaide, "Famous Women of History," (Manila: Unpublished manuscript, 1943), 11.

²³ Mananzan, "The Filipino Women: Before and After the Spanish Conquest of the Philippines," 16.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 26.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 34.

²⁶ Aida F. Santos, "Do Women Really Hold Up Half The Sky? Notes on the Women's Movement in the Philippines," in Mananzan, ed., *Essays on Women*, 36–51, at 40.

Gender Inequity and Violence

Gender inequity continues to fester in cultures and societies. The power dynamics that construct the meaning of body and gender create hierarchies. And such hierarchies result in oppression and injustice, which in many cases end in violence. Violence is nurtured by gender inequity. Gender inequity breeds violence. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza writes:

Violence against women and their children remains all-pervasive. It is not limited to one specific class, geographical area, or type of person. Rather it cuts across social differences and status lines: white and black, rich and poor, Asian and European, Hispanic and Anglo-Saxon, urban and rural, religious and secular, professional and illiterate, heterosexual and lesbian, able-bodied, and differently abled, young and old, women face violence daily in North America because they are women.²⁷

Such can be said too in other parts of the world. Violence against women is a universal phenomenon, and tragically it is that which binds women's experiences, though different in a plurality of contexts.

In the United States a woman is beaten in her home every fifteen seconds and about 50,000 women seek refuge in restraining order or protection order. Only if the offender was a stranger, however, and not an intimate would police likely sign a formal complaint.²⁸ Femicide—murder of women—is committed in their homes by men with whom they are intimately related.²⁹ Nine out of ten women are murdered in this intimate context, and four out of five are killed in their homes.³⁰ No woman is safe and protected from sexual victimization. Many women are beaten and battered, and this is the major cause of homelessness for women and children. At least forty percent of homeless women fled from the abuse of their partner. But fleeing from violence in their homes, they face the threat of assault and rape on the streets.³¹ “As

²⁷ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “Ties that Bind: Domestic Violence Against Women,” in Mary John Mananzan, et al., eds., *Women Resisting Violence: Spirituality for Life*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1996), 39–55, at 39. See also Jaina Hanmer and Mary Maynard, eds., *Women, Violence, and Social Control* (London: Macmillan Press, 1987); Kate Young, Carol Wolkowitz, and Roslyn McGullagh, *Of Marriage and the Market: Women's Subordination in International Perspective* (London: CSE Books, 1981); Roxanna Carillo, *Battered Dreams: Violence Against Women as an Obstacle to Development* (New York: United Nations Development Fund for Women, 1992); Margaret Schuler, ed., *Freedom from Violence: Women's Strategies from Around the World* (New York: United Nations Development Fund for Women, 1992); Jessie Tellis Nayak, “Institutional Violence Against Women in Different Cultures,” in *God's Image* 8 (September 1989): 4–14.

²⁸ Fiorenza, “Ties that Bind,” 40.

²⁹ See Jill Radford and Diana E. Russell, *Femicide: The Politics of Woman Killing* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992).

³⁰ Women's Action Coalition, *The Women's Action Coalition Stats: The Facts About Women* (New York: New York Press, 1993), 56.

³¹ Carol J. Adams & Marie M. Fortune, eds., *Violence Against Women and Children: A Christian Theological Sourcebook* (New York: Continuum, 1998), 15. Many women face rape as a cost of homeless life. Without providing a permanent address, a homeless woman's rape case is unprosecutable. “If rapes are not prosecuted unless there is a permanent address, then de facto homeless women are not “rapable” in legal sense as they become agonizingly more

sexuality is gendered as man and woman, gender inequality is sexuality as dominance and subordination.”³² A systematic inequality of power is instituted in the gender roles and differentiation. Its practice is sexual. When men dominate women, this domination is sexual.³³ The exercise of power and domination through sex is at the base of rape, incest, pornography, sexual harassment, captivity in the home. When sexual violation of a woman is done with impunity, it is an index of the social power of a man. Sexual violation is founded on the low status of women.

Shaji George Kochuthara wrote a powerful article entitled “Dowry as a Social-Structural Sin,” in which he showed the unabated social evil of dowry in India.³⁴ Dowry is punishable by law. Despite its illegality, dowry continues to be widely practiced in Indian society. It is so pervasive, that no religion, caste, socio-economic group could claim innocence in the perpetuation of this practice.³⁵ The dowry is the amount of money paid by the bride’s family to the family of the bridegroom, a transaction that continues for many years, long after the marriage. The estimated number of dowry-related deaths in India is 25,000 a year.³⁶ Extreme and brutal forms of violence are committed, like dousing women in kerosene and burning them. The majority of women who are tortured, killed, and driven to suicide, are between eighteen and twenty five, married for a period of three months to a year.³⁷

Dowry creates a cycle of violence that traps women and their families. It is the leading cause of the cultural devaluation of women as inferior and burdensome to the family.³⁸ The abortion of female fetuses is the pernicious consequence of dowry as a social menace on families. According to some studies, up to 35 to 40 million female

“rapable” (“rapable” to others besides the abusive partner they probably left) in the material sense.” This data cited in *Ibid.*, 31, uses as its source Stephanie Golden, *The Women Outside: Meaning and Myths of Homelessness* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

³²Cited in *Ibid.*, 18. See also Susan Thistlethwaite, “Sexual Harrassment: To Protect, Empower,” *Christianity and Crisis*, October 21, 1991: 328–30; Carole J. Sheffield, “Sexual Terrorism,” in *Women: A Feminist Perspective*, ed. Jo Freeman (Palo, Alto, CA: Mayfield Publishing, 1984).

³³ Frances Olsen, “Feminist Theory in Grand Style,” in *Columbia Law Review* 89: 1147–78, at 1158.

³⁴ Shaji George Kochutura, “Dowry as a Social-Structural Sin” *Feminist Catholic Theological Ethics: Conversations in the World Church*, in Linda Hogan and A.E. Orobator, eds., (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2014), 108–122.

³⁵ Abraham M. George, *India Untouched. The Forgotten Face of Rural Poverty* (Chennai: East West Books, 2004), 207.

³⁶ “According to official records, more than 2,500 bride-burning deaths are recorded every year. Unofficial sources estimate more than 25,000 cases of bride-burning every year. Many more are left maimed and scarred as a result of attempts on their lives. In spite of the prohibition of dowry by law, in recent decades there has been a steady increase of dowry-related violence—10 to 15 percent every year.” See footnote, no. 5 in Kochutura, “Dowry as a Social-Structural Sin,” 120

³⁷ *Ibid.* 112–13.

³⁸ Madhu Purnima Kishwar, “Strategies for Combating the Culture of Dowry and Domestic Violence in India,” in *Daughters of Fire, The India Court of Women on Dowry and Related Forms of Violence* (hereafter referred to as *Daughters of Fire*), 89.

feticides have taken place in India.³⁹ If girls are allowed to live, they are not fed as well as the boys, who will be assets to the family, and they are also denied education, for the better qualified they become, the more burdensome it is for families to raise dowries to pay for a man of equal status.⁴⁰ Such a dire situation compels women to remain unmarried, but this does not release them from the cycle of violence. They are still trapped in it, as they are alienated by their own families, who deny them their dignity and rights, making their lives one of suffering.⁴¹ The unceasing claim of the dowry on families impoverishes them as they have to sell their properties or incur huge amounts of debt. Often they are never able to pay the debt and many of these families see the only way out in mass suicides.⁴²

AIDS is proliferated in different ways in different cultures. Gender discrimination is at the base of the transmission of AIDS. In Africa and in many other cultures, women's low status relative to men, not only diminish their access to livelihood opportunities, but also disempowers them in their sexual relationship with men. Without power over their sexual lives, as they may have been pressured into marriages not of their own choosing, or coerced into sexual relations with relatives of their deceased husbands, they have little control over occasions of infection. They are often powerless in persuading male partners to engage in safe sex, or in refusing sex when it is demanded. Their subordination to men is the arbiter of their health or sickness, life or death.⁴³

In all cases, men who contract HIV/AIDS pass it on to women at disproportionate rates. And when infected, women carry such a stigma that they are blamed for their illness and are ostracized. Rejected by their husbands who infected them, they are thrown out of their marital homes, with nowhere to go; even their natal families reject them for fear of the disgrace of AIDS.⁴⁴ Stories abound of women infected by AIDS being exiled or stoned to death. There are also stories of unmarried women who are raped and infected by men because of the belief that sex with virgins will prevent or cure men of their infection.⁴⁵ And given their lack of access to

³⁹ Shaji George Kochuthara, "Millions of Missing Girls! Female Foeticide and Ethical Concerns," *Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church Newsletter Forum* (2012), <http://www.catholicethics.com/july2012>.

⁴⁰ Kochutura, "Dowry as a Social-Structural Sin," 116.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Margaret A. Farley, *Compassionate Respect: A Feminist Approach to Medical Ethics and Other Questions* (New York: Paulist Press, 2002), 15. When men are infected with AIDS, it is women who often bear the consequences of meeting financial needs, caring for the sick, and suffering the stigma. And when the women themselves are infected or have AIDS, there is no one left to care for them and no money left for their care.

⁴⁴ Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Theological Bioethics*, 161. Gillian Patterson calls for interfaith cooperation in fighting AIDS, and particularly in seeking "the economic, social, educational, and legal empowerment of women and girls" as well as women's access to safe and reliable means of protection under their own control. "Braving Rows and Saving Lives," *The Tablet* (July 24, 2004), 8. At the 2004 Bangkok AIDS conference, reports were made of scientific work on vaginal microbicides that women can use to block infectious agents. See Jon D. Fuller, "The XVth International AIDS Conference: A Scientific Perspective," *America* (August 30, 2004).

⁴⁵ Ibid. 10–11.

appropriate health care, women transmit their infection to their newborn children, creating a new generation of AIDS victims.⁴⁶

The oppression of and injustice against women have dire consequences for society, in the spiral of evil. There are fewer and fewer women providing for family needs under great adversity. "Farming, which is the backbone of the social structure in traditional societies, and in which women play a key role in Africa, is on the point of collapse on that continent . . . Traditional healing arts, as cultivated by women, are unable to cope with the magnitude of AIDS."⁴⁷ With the increasing death toll of women and men, mothers and fathers, there is an entire generation of AIDS orphans, who are surviving on their own, in child-headed households.⁴⁸ Orphan girls are often pushed into sex to provide for themselves and siblings, risking HIV infection themselves.⁴⁹

If there ever were situations in which our spirits and hearts are broken in the face of the suffering of others, it is difficult to think of situations other than that of women victimized in domestic violence, of women tortured and burned in dowry-related murders, and of AIDS-infected women stoned to death. They are the abused, exploited, shamed, and outcast who are crying to the heavens for justice. It is in our collective resistance to violence against women, in compassion and solidarity, that forges our unity as persons, fellow human beings, in community, across our differences and plurality.

Liberationist Perspective

Preferential option, the linchpin of liberation theology and its ethics, has become, even with its strong hierarchical support by popes and bishops, the most controversial term since the Reformers' cry, "Salvation through faith alone." It elicits passionate affirmation as well as vigorous opposition.

In his erudite article, "Proper and Improper Partiality and Preferential Option for the Poor," Stephen Pope presents an incisive and analytical response to the opposition to the use of preferential option for the poor.⁵⁰ The most controversial term in the phrase preferential option for the poor is "preferential". Preference in the context of our discourse means that the poor have claims of precedence over others. Gregory Baum illustrates this function when he writes that, "when confronted by a conflict between rich and poor (or powerful and powerless, or masters and slaves), then the Gospel demands . . . that [one] side with the oppressed."⁵¹ This statement is not without problems.

⁴⁶ Ibid. 16. "In most societies, girls and women face heavier risks of HIV infection than men because their diminished economic and social status compromises their ability to choose safer and healthier life strategies." United Strategies Special Session on AIDS Fact Sheet (June 25–27, 2001), 21.

⁴⁷ Cahill, *Theological Bioethics*, 162.

⁴⁸ James Olaitan Ayayi, *The HIV/AIDS Epidemic in Nigeria: Some Ethical Considerations* (Rome: Editrice Pontificia Universita Gregoriana, 2003), 76–82.

⁴⁹ Cahill, *Theological Bioethics*, 159.

⁵⁰ Stephen J. Pope, "Proper and Improper Partiality and Preferential Option for the Poor," *Theological Studies* 54 (1983): 242–71.

⁵¹ Gregory Baum, "Liberation Theology and 'the Supernatural,'" *The Ecumenist* 19, 6 (September–October 1981): 84.

Pope sorted out the three different kinds of partiality as they pertain to three general arenas of action: cognitive, moral, and religious. Advocates of the preferential option for the poor would appear to violate impartiality in all three of these areas. First, preferential option violates cognitive impartiality by reason of the “hermeneutical privilege of the poor.” Second, preferential option for the poor violates moral impartiality by affirming that the poor are the privileged objects of neighbor love. Third, preferential option for the poor violates religious impartiality, by claiming that God loves the poor more than others.⁵²

It is a careful discourse on the three oppositions to the use of preferential option for the poor that bring to focus its core meaning which has a compelling universal moral claim on men and women of reason and good will. The preferential option for the poor is where feminist ethics, ecological ethics, and liberation theology converge in the triple cries of oppression.

Cognitive Partiality

Cognitive partiality suggests intellectual honesty that is compromised, due to a bias that distorts experience, obstructs understanding, and undermines judgment. To some critics, the hermeneutical privilege of the poor violates cognitive partiality because it promotes apriori bias in favor of the experience and perspective of the poor. That this perspective not only gives an interior and authentic understanding of the gospel but is the only sufficient standpoint from which to do so, seems to be implied in the statement of Gutiérrez that “God’s love is revealed to the poor. They are the ones who receive, understand, and proclaim this love.”⁵³ Taking the same stance, Sobrino writes that the poor are the primary recipients of the Good News and therefore as having an inherent capacity to understand it better than anyone else.⁵⁴ Pope suggests that this attribution to the poor of an extraordinary insight into the kingdom stand in need of modification. A movement is discerned in liberation theology of a shift from an absolute methodological privilege to a modest relative normative privilege,⁵⁵ a shift that can be further promoted “by more carefully differentiating valid claims of insights and sensibilities availed by material poverty from illusory or exaggerated claims of broad class-based epistemological superiority.”⁵⁶

Certainly poverty can give one a lens for seeing and understanding God’s goodness, mercy, and justice, and there is no doubt that some among the poor have come to know God in a way and manner not attained by the non-poor. There are, nonetheless, other loci of grace, where God discloses Godself to us, in ways that can touch and transform us. Be that as it may, Pope still holds that far from being biased, the hermeneutical privilege works against bias, because we see the truth from the

⁵² Pope, “Proper and Improper Impartiality,” 246.

⁵³ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Power of the Poor in History: Selected Writings* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1983), 105.

⁵⁴ Jon Sobrino, *The True Church and the Poor*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1984), 140.

⁵⁵ Pope cites chapter 10 of John O’Brien, *Theology and the Option for the Poor* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1992).

⁵⁶ Pope, “Proper and Improper Partiality,” 250.

perspective of those who are often the victims of bias, the poor and the marginalized. It is through their eyes as well as from their hearts, that we better understand the great social issues of our time.⁵⁷

Moral Partiality

The second partiality is moral partiality. It too is spoken of pejoratively, viewed as unfair and unjust, influenced by bias and prejudice. It is contrary to what is right and good based on fair play and social equity. Impartiality is a central imperative of ethics, and partiality is the violation of this imperative. As a principle of distributive justice, moral impartiality requires equitable sharing of benefits and burdens according to morally defensible criteria. Those who uphold the meritocratic conception of distributive justice criticize preferential option for the poor as promoting membership in a social class, regardless of talent, effort, or achievements, as the basis of access to benefits and resources. This distributive justice is viewed as a form of reverse discrimination, and is deemed immoral. A proper response to this criticism is based on the kind of partiality that defines preferential option for the poor. It is a partiality that has need as its basis, where need can be interpreted to include poverty, which renders people vulnerable, powerless, and marginalized. As a principle of justice rather than simple charity, the partiality for the poor is not a partiality for a class over and against other classes, but it is what makes possible for the poor to share and participate in the community and its good. This partiality is not only morally justified, but also morally required of the Christian faith that calls for special care for those who are not able to provide for themselves, given their marginalized status in society. The preferential option for the poor must be so deeply connected with the solidarity for the poor, by which our partiality for them means embracing their problems and struggles as our own.⁵⁸

Divine Partiality

The third partiality is divine partiality, which puts into question the ways of the love of God. Attributing partiality to the love of God is highly problematic. If God's preference for the poor over others is due simply to their being poor or being a member of a poor class, then partiality is rooted in bias and is class-based. The proper response to this critique of the divine partiality is to make the critical distinction between love and care. Care is an affection towards another made deeper because of his or her need. Rather than being viewed as an alternative to love, care is "only the form that love takes when the lover is attentive to the beloved's need."⁵⁹ And because the depth of care is moved by the depth of need, it makes perfect sense to speak of the preferential option for the poor. For this reason, Pope holds that the phrase special care for the needy seems in some ways more specific and more accurate. It is care that moves the divine heart to give priority to the poor, as it is that which moves a mother's heart for a sick child. And it is care that makes our preferential concern for the poor not an act of condescension that often accompanies unilateral beneficence,

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ See Pope, "Proper and Improper Partiality," 250–52.

⁵⁹ Jules Toner, *The Experience of Love* (Washington: Corpus, 1968), 80.

but one that flows from our hearts so utterly moved as we are by the need of another. Only in this view can we see how the universality of God's love can be reconciled with God's preferential love for the poor. For only a heart that can love the poor, who are outcast and powerless, is capable of loving all. God's preferential love for the poor underscores God's inclusive love for all human beings.⁶⁰

Preferential Option for the Poor and the Triple Cries of Oppression

Feminist theology and ecological theology converge with liberation theology, whose epistemological focus is the preferential option for the poor and their liberation from the degradation and dehumanization. The connection between the social domination of women and the ecological domination of the earth is as deep as the connection between the cry of the poor and cry of the earth. Leonardo Boff writes: "The logic that exploits classes and subjects peoples to the interests of the few rich and powerful countries is the same as the logic that devastates the Earth and plunders its wealth, showing no solidarity with the rest of humankind and future generations."⁶¹

In the diminishment of women, the oppression of the poor, and the plundering of the earth, we hear triple cries. All cannot be silenced. Until these cries of oppression are heeded, creation will continue to groan from its depths. Only when relationships are rightly ordered, truly life-giving, and not death-dealing, is humankind and all of creation one with the Creator Spirit, the origin and source of all love, life, and goodness.

Global Perspective

The book, *Prospects for A Common Morality*, edited by Gene Outka and John Reeder, has brought to the table major positions regarding common morality from a broad diversity of perspectives since its publication in 1993.⁶² The question of common morality is even now more pressing in the face of global pluralism. Some scholars promote the reality and validity of common morality or global ethics; others hold that if a global ethics is promulgated, it can only be platitudinous and bereft of real content; and still others propose a revised concept of common morality or common good that is more based on praxis.

Global Ethics and Critical Positions

Hans Küng, known for his work in interreligious dialogue both in his writing, and his active engagements, was behind the *Document Toward a Global Ethics*, which was passed by the Parliament of the World's Religions in its meeting in

⁶⁰ See Pope, "Proper and Improper Partiality," 252–62.

⁶¹ Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, trans. Phillip Berryman (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1997), xi. Poor Women in developing world are given voice in the following book, among others: Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999).

⁶² Gene Outka and John P. Reeder, eds. *Prospects for a Common Morality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

Chicago, September 4, 1993, with 115 religions represented among more than 6,500 delegates.⁶³ A fundamental criticism of consensus statements, such as the Parliament of World Religions document, is that they remain on the level of abstract generalities. Küng himself comments that, while the stated principles of global ethics are good, “some will object that they are still far too general.”⁶⁴ Annette Baier writes, “Lists of universal rights, if they are both to cohere and to receive anything like general assent, must be so vague as to be virtually empty.”⁶⁵ Jean Porter echoes Baier’s position. “The claim that all moral traditions share a fundamental core which amounts to a universally valid morality, appears to me to be defensible only if the core in question is described at such a high level of generality as to be virtually empty, and even then, it is difficult to arrive at a statement of principles that would be universally accepted.”⁶⁶

Sharon Welch, working from a Foucauldian perspective suggests that Western notions of equality are creations of a dominant gender and class that mask oppression.⁶⁷ In the same vein, Margaret Farley recognizes that the notion of a universal morality has marginalized particular groups and masked differences. From a feminist perspective she sees two major obstacles to universal morality: the feminist emphasis on particularity, and the lack of commonality even in women’s experiences. Despite these obstacles, she believes in common features of human experience that are recognizable by diverse cultures. She cites the capacity for human suffering and joy as intrinsic to being human, in spite of differences in gender, class, race, and culture. Farley’s position is representative of those critical of the Enlightenment’s understanding of universal morality, but it is also representative of those seeking a new way of viewing a common/global morality. She questions whether all efforts to identify commonalities nullify differences, with the contingent mistaken for the essential. She attempts to strike a balance between those who claim that a universal or common morality is an illusion and those who hold that a universal morality is determined by a dominant class and thus marginalizes others and masks differences.⁶⁸

Praxis-Based Global Ethics

Lisa Cahill proposes a revised concept of the common good by bringing to bear on global ethics some aspects of Aquinas’s view of practical reason, especially in its

⁶³ For the text of the document, see Hans Küng, ed., *Yes to a Global Ethic* (New York: Continuum, 1996) 7–26. This document is also available online. See http://www.parliamentofreligions.org/_includes/FCKcontent/File/TowardsAGlobalEthic.pdf, 1-15 (accessed on July 23, 2014).

⁶⁴ Hans Küng, *Global Responsibility: In Search of a New Ethics* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 63. See also Hans Küng and Helmut Schmidt, *A Global Ethic and Global Responsibilities: Two Declarations* (London: SCM, 1998).

⁶⁵ Annette C. Baier, “Claims, Rights, Responsibilities,” in Outka and Reeder, *Prospects for a Common Morality*, 152.

⁶⁶ Jean Porter, “The Search for a Global Ethic,” *Theological Studies* 62 (2001): 105–121, at 121.

⁶⁷ See Sharon D. Welch, *Communities of Resistance and Solidarity: A Feminist Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1985).

⁶⁸ See Margaret A. Farley, “Feminism and Universal Morality,” in Outka and Reeder, *Prospects for a Common Morality*, 170–90.

historical context and its interdependence with moral virtue. Aquinas's moral theory is useful in breaking the impasse between the historicity of reason and the universality that global ethics demands by a praxis-based interpretation of moral objectivity and reasonableness. For Aquinas, moral reason is practical reason perfected by the virtue of prudence, whose chief purpose is to attain truthful action, not speculative truth. Moral truth as practical truth is a truth of action, and moral truth understood in the realm of action is realized inductively, experientially, and interactively in the actual engagement of concrete human problems and projects. Taking this Thomistic view of practical truth in relation to global ethics, Cahill writes that "the possibility of global ethics, then, should not be pondered in the realm of abstract or deductive reason alone, but through engagement with practical political affairs . . . The criterion of global truth must be a network of global experiences and practices that also provide its content."⁶⁹ One sees here a search for a global ethics that is beyond its theoretical focus, stressing its experiential and contextual focus as different cultural and religious traditions engage in moral conflict and agreement on concrete issues in a long and difficult inductive process toward a convergent ethics, where common values, principles, and meanings are shared in a transcultural and global realm.

This long and difficult inductive process must be engaged for instance in the issue of female circumcision, a cultural practice with deep-rooted meaning and significance for those who practice it, but viewed as a violation of human rights by those who see it from a different ethical lens. How to negotiate these views that are essentially fragmented, is a formidable task of a praxis-based global ethics, founded on a perspectival dialogue, that is accountable to both cultural integrity and transcultural transformation.⁷⁰

A Culturally Inclusive Universalism

In my article in *Concilium*, "Human Rights from an Asian Perspective: The Challenge of Diversity and the Limits to Universality,"⁷¹ I wrote that the Asian values debate is a discourse on the relation of culture specificity and universality of human rights. Human rights doctrine and language take shape in the cultural, economic, and political history of a people—the terrain where their battles for a just and humane society are fought. But there are core human values that bind us all, transcending our political histories and cultural peculiarities." I cited the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 and of the United Nations Millennium Goals of 2000 as attesting to the reality of an interdependent world, where we are all bound by a common moral order, in which we find a final recourse.⁷²

⁶⁹ Lisa Sowle Cahill, "Toward Global Ethics," *Theological Studies* 63 (2002): 324–344, at 335.

⁷⁰ See Mary Nyangweso Wangila, *Female Circumcision: The Interplay of Religion, Culture, and Gender in Kenya* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2007).

⁷¹ Christina A. Astorga, "Human Rights from an Asian Perspective: The Challenge of Diversity and the Limits to Universality," *Human Nature and Natural Law*, ed. Lisa Sowle Cahill, Hille Haker, and Eloi Messi Metogo, *Concilium* 2003/3 (London: SCM, 2010), 88–98.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 94.

The Philippines was under the Spanish rule for almost 400 years and the American control for a much shorter time, but native Filipino traditions and customs, in their essence, have remained unaffected. “Outward form has changed, but inward thought has not changed. The Filipino has neither been transmuted into a Spaniard nor an American. What we might term the Filipino soul has survived the centuries of contact with foreign races.”⁷³ When the Bill of Rights of 1973 forged by the Marcos dictatorship was massively violated in human rights abuses, the International Bill of Right was invoked against these abuses and the dictatorship itself. The universal declaration that “human rights should be protected . . . if man is not to be compelled to have recourse, as a last resort, to rebellion against tyranny and oppression,” rendered the 1986 People Power Revolution, a legitimate uprising of a people for their fundamental human rights.⁷⁴

Here we see the need for both culture specificity and universality, avoiding the extreme of cultural relativism⁷⁵ resulting in ethnocentric blindness, or extreme universalism resulting in mindless hegemony. I take the position of a culturally-inclusive universalism, where universal human values find valency and legitimacy in cultures, and cultural values are grounded in inherent universal human rights.⁷⁶ “Human rights cannot go truly global unless it goes deeply local.”⁷⁷ As the philosopher Martha Nussbaum observes, “there are features of humanness that lie beneath all local traditions and are there to be seen whether or not they are in fact recognized in local traditions.”⁷⁸ The task of continuing cross-cultural conversation and education is to bring these features to greater visibility and recognition.

Concluding Statement

⁷³ George A. Malcolm, “Constitutional History of the Philippines” *American Bar Association Journal* 6, 4 (1920): 109–112, at 112.

⁷⁴ See Soliman M. Santos, Jr., “Of Centenaries and Centennials: A Filipino Contribution to the Australian Debate on a Bill of Rights,” *Australian Journal of Human Rights*, at <http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/journals/AJHR/2000/8.html>, 1–30, at 14 (accessed on June 17, 2014).

⁷⁵ Matthew Weinberg cites Robert Edgerton’s work, *Sick Societies Challenging the Myth of Primitive Harmony* (New York: The Free Press, 1992). Weinberg writes: “His research demonstrates that entire societies are sick—a reference to the systematic and unjust treatment of certain of its members such as woman—and that such dysfunctional societies inevitably perish . . . their social and decision-making structures serve no other purpose than to institutionalize inequality and injustice. Thus, the mere fact that differences across cultures exist does not mean that all variations in social and cultural practices are right or acceptable. On these grounds, relativism itself has been critiqued as immoral.” Matthew Weinberg, “The Human Rights Discourse: A Bahá’í Perspective,” <http://info.bahai.org/article1-8-3-2.html>, 1–15, at 3, (accessed on June 17, 2014).

⁷⁶ See Boaventura de Sousa Santos, “Toward a Multicultural Conception of Human Rights,” http://www.ces.uc.pt/bss/documentos/toward_multicultural_conception_human_rights.pdf, 39–60 (accessed on July 23, 2014). See also Wolfgang Koerner, *Human Rights: Toward a Common Understanding* (Canada: Library of Parliament, Research Branch, 1996).

⁷⁷ Cited in Elizabeth More, “The Universal Declaration of Human Rights in Today’s World,” in *Journal of International Communication* 11:2 (2005), 27–45, at 28.

⁷⁸ Cited in Weinberg, “The Human Rights Discourse: a Bahá’í Perspective,” 4.

We deal with concepts and theories in theology and ethics, and while we have the leisure to negotiate them in the quiet of our research and scholarship, life and death hang in the balance, contingent on those concepts and theories. The excommunication, for instance, of Sister Margaret McBride, the Chair of the ethics committee at St. Joseph's Hospital in Phoenix, Arizona by Bishop Thomas J. Olmstead for permitting the abortion of an 11 week old fetus in order to save the life of the woman with acute pulmonary hypertension, who was the mother of four children, has left me very disturbed.⁷⁹ No ethical methodology is perfect, and in difficult cases, an ethical methodology cannot hold up; in fact, its entire theoretical construct can collapse if one is to choose what is reasonable, humane, and compassionate. At the end, shall the protection of deeply entrenched concepts and theories be the final arbiter in life-and-death situations? If it is, moral dogmatism can be pernicious. It can be violent, claiming many lives and causing unimaginable human misery.

The gender injustice that has been the product of the centuries-old concept of women as inferior to men, is at the base of the unabated violence against millions of women in many cultures and societies. Violence is nurtured by injustice. My research for this paper has left me with a profound moral anguish over this brute fact. I have grown, however, in conviction that our work as theologians and ethicists is to dismantle, deconstruct, and destroy thought systems that give legitimacy to violence against women, and to create an alternative vision, where women and men, in what Margaret Farley calls just love, are in relationships of equality, mutuality, and reciprocity. For when women are diminished, men are demeaned; when women are empowered, men are transformed, both flourishing in their common humanity. I believe that one must start with transforming one's own significant personal relationships in line with the vision of just love, that one may have the moral ascendancy to participate in a collective action to create an entirely new world where women and men are deeply and truly equal. In that world of caring relationships, the words of Jesus may be a reality for both men and women "I came so that they may have life and have it in abundance." (John 10:10).

Preferential option for the poor has been debated, but when I see throngs of poor families in front of the trash bins of McDonald's or Jolibee every night, scavenging for the only food that they could have for the entire day, my heart breaks. I weep. In my country, they call this "pagpag," which means "to shake." Whatever people could get from the trash bins, they simply shake and eat or re-cook it if needed. There is something terribly wrong in a world where the poor are practically eating from the garbage bins, while the rich live in wanton extravagance, like one who demolished his mansion to build a new one so he can install a car elevator that reaches every floor, or like the CEO of Allied Signal Corporation, Lawrence Bossidy, who was paid \$12.4 million, more than the total amount of \$7.8 million paid to its entire Mexican workforce of 3,810.⁸⁰ When a young man in the Philippines chose to be unplugged from the respirator, because the cost of continuing with it would leave

⁷⁹ See Bernard G. Prusak, "Double Effect, All Over Again: The Case of Sister Margaret McBride," *Theoretical Medicine and Bioethics* 32 (2011): 271-83.

⁸⁰David Schilling, "Maquiladora Workers Deserve a Sustainable Living Wage," *Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility Brief* 23, no.10 (1995), 3C. Schilling relies on Sarah Anderson, et al., *Workers Lose, CEOs Win II*, Institute for Policies Study, April 29, 1995.

his family impoverished, his sisters and brothers without food, the debate about preferential option for the poor just makes no sense anymore.

Global ethics has been discussed and debated. But before it is even a concept, it is an existential reality. When the Malaysia Airlines Flight 370 plummeted, with 239 lives lost, practically the entire world came together in search of the plane. And when we see on TV the grief and anguish of the fathers and mothers of the Korean children who died in the ferry that sank into the sea, something tears at our collective soul. And when we see bodies of Syrian men, women, and children burned and mangled by chemical gas, we are shaken to the very core of our communal being. Yes, we are different in color, race, culture, religion, but our lives are so interlocked, and so also are our hearts and spirits. At our deepest core, there where we are most profoundly human, we all are one.