



Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Religion

WTF, What Gives, and Who Cares?

The Hopeless of Our Discipline and Future

Miguel A. De La Torre

**Part of JRER *Special Issue:*
*Got Ethics?***

Envisioning and Evaluating the Future of Our Guild and Discipline,

by Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, Gary Dorrien,

Miguel A. De La Torre, Gloria Albrecht

The Society of Christian Ethics specializes in sustaining and maintaining a way of doing ethics that at best ignores its complicity with advancing the neoliberal goals of Empire, and at worst,

justifies Empire. The consistent call for equilibrium within social structures¹ normalizes and legitimizes the oppression and repression of communities of color. So forgive me when some of us, struggling to liberate our colonized minds and bodies,² ask what the f#@k. The unintended consequences when white colleagues employ the rhetoric of diversity are that from their margins a cry is ignored claiming what the SCE calls ethical analysis is incongruent with our very being.

Our charge toward diversity, all too often, is more concerned with cosmetics than transformation. The quest is on at our academic institutions, and dare I suggest our guild, for the darkest hue with the most colonized white mind. Why? Because authentic diversity will

¹ Ethicists like Reinhold Niebuhr make room for inequalities, for the sake of societal equilibrium. He writes, “No complex society will be able to dispense with certain inequalities of privilege. Some of them are necessary for the proper performance of certain social functions; and others (though this is not so certain) may be needed to prompt energy and diligence in the performance of important functions.” See *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1932), 128. Niebuhr relates ethical principles like justice, liberty, and social order to the Christian concept of love. Although these ethical principles are not necessarily in conflict with each other, Niebuhr believes they should be prioritized. The global disarray following the Second World War and the need for a stable world order in a nuclear age led Niebuhr to make a preferential option for order, even at the cost of certain inequalities. He is not the only Eurocentric ethicist who is willing to accept inequalities for the good of society. Other ethicists, from his era to today, also advanced the empire’s hold by advocating order. For example, while Paul Ramsey called for equitable race relations, he critiqued lunch counter sit-ins conducted by blacks as an improper social Christian action because it disrupted society’s law and order; see *Christian Ethics and the Sit-In* (New York: Association Press, 1961), 48-49. For John Rawls, the establishment of justice was encouraged as long as it remained constrained within the limits of a well-ordered society; see *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971), 453-57. And even James Gustafson was fine with the pursuit of justice, as long as it did not upset “a necessary equilibrium in society”; see *Can Ethics be Christian?* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1975), 119-20. The ethics of the majority of Euroamerican ethicists exists to preserve the established order, not just of their society and their place within that society, but I would argue, the empire as well, and the U.S. empire’s place in the world. Whenever ethics is reduced to maintaining law and order, justice is sacrificed on the altar of Eurocentric pragmatism.

² The concept concerning the colonization of the mind arose when global marginalized communities began to influence the academic discourse. For example, Frantz Fanon writes in a chapter titled *Colonial War and Mental Disorder*: “That imperialism which today is fighting against a true liberation of mankind [*sic*] leaves in its wake here and there tinctures of decay which we must search out and mercilessly expel from our lands and our spirits.” See *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 249. Paulo Freire believes we can move toward decolonizing our minds, advising that “those who authentically commit themselves to the people must re-examine themselves constantly.” See *Pedagogy of the Oppressed: 30th Anniversary Edition* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2000 [1970]), 60.

challenge existing structures, and who wants transformation when cleverly and creatively constructing the image of political correctness suffices. As long as things look diverse on the surface, the organization can be left alone to do business as usual.

Since childhood, those of us who resided in the underside of history have been taught to see and interpret reality through the eyes of the dominant culture, specifically white, heterosexual, middle-upper class, patriarchal eyes. As ethicists, not much has changed, as we learn and are expected to also conduct ethical analysis through the eyes of the dominant culture, employing paradigms that fail to resonate with our communities. Perspectives emanating among scholars of color are usually kept at bay. Just look at your own religion department. How many scholars of color are among your core faculty? Do they instead over-represent the adjunct and lecturer posts? Or simply check the footnotes of the last article you wrote. I am painfully aware that our presence is requested to demonstrate a politically correct diversity; nevertheless, our scholarship remains confined to the barrios and ghettos. And while working at an academic institution pays the bills, there is neither reason nor motivation to continue coming to the SCE, hitting our heads against the wall. I'm committed to attend the next SCE meeting in New Orleans (2017); afterwards, I may stop attending altogether, mainly because I have grown tired of conversations such as these.

I am tired of overhearing during our SCE breaks white colleagues inform white PhD students that they shouldn't bother trying to apply for a tenure-track position because of the discrimination that exists against white men in the academy. Of perusing the class syllabus of my white colleagues and noticing a lack of books written by scholars of color, and if it does have the

token book to be discussed on the last week of classes, the book was published in the last century. Of white feminists who use the term “womanist and mujerista” to show they are on fleek, even though it reveals their ignorance of the Latina discourse, thus making this phrase problematic if the attempt is to signify inclusiveness. And of course, scholars of color who as scholar-activists are dismissed because they are perceived to do social work and not real rigorous scholarship.

But wait, didn't I serve as president of this fine institution? Can't we just point at my tenure and claim we arrived, living in a post-racial SCE? While serving as president of this guild has been an honor for most, I found it difficult not only to deal with constant attempts to silence me and make my tenure ineffective; but also, deal with the official questioning of my integrity. Heaven forbid a Latino man can be anything more than just articulate. If I had to do it over, I'm not sure I would. This point was recently driven home when I realized that in a recent survey conducted requesting input from former SCE presidents, my phone never rang; nor, I recently discovered, the phone of the last black man who served as president of this society. But to raise these concerns is to have the majority feign at best shock, at worst, my dismissal as some angry Latino.

Terms like “race-hustler” or “playing the race card,” are tossed around whenever the voice of the powerless moves beyond a token squeak, in deference to those accustomed to their privileged space. While conversation continues to swirl in defiance of the goals and objectives of the 21st Century Initiative and the 2020 Future of Christian Ethics Committee, wondering for the umpteenth time why we need Working Groups of Color, color folk are expected to meekly

respond, “Good afternoon, sir, sorry to bother you, madam. May I kindly bring it to your attention that our groups’ contributions are not taken seriously due to your foot, signifying the normalized discourse, that unintentionally is placed upon our neck? Do you have a moment to discuss what we perceive to be an unfortunate situation? We would so appreciate the opportunity to discuss your foot in a positive and uplifting manner. If not, then perhaps we could schedule an appointment at your earliest convenience?”

Forgive the bite in some of my words, but it is to be expected when our people are constantly treated no better than dogs. Let’s be clear. Working Groups of Color do not exist for the sake or benefit of ethicists of color, they exist for the sake and benefit of ethicists of the dominant culture, few of whom ever bother to show up when they meet. It is no hyperbole when I say that without ethicists of color, the SCE would cease to have a future. Within the lifetime of most of the folks in this room, Euroamericans who currently represent 62 percent of the U.S. population will cease to be the majority population.³ The SCE ignores these trends at its own peril. Why? Because the religious and ethical dilemmas, questions, and concerns faced by communities of color are the dilemmas, questions, and concerns that will be faced by the largest group of Americans. To continue to ignore these voices is to ensure the loss of cutting edge academic excellence. Indeed, this is the real danger for SCE; ceasing to be relevant for the emerging majority of Americans. When we consider, as sociologist Robert Bellah did, that individualism lies at the very core of American culture, deeply rooted in America’s social

³ “State & County QuickFacts,” U.S. Census Bureau, last modified December 2, 2015, <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/00000.html>

history,⁴ we should not be surprised when this hyper-individualistic culture focuses on a self-centered Christianity whose ethos is legitimized by the SCE.

For some ethicists, primarily from the dominant culture, an attempt is made to understand the world. But because many lack the ability of differentiating between a blink and a wink,⁵ especially in growing communities of color, their final analysis lacks gravitas. There are also those ethicists, primarily of color and from a more liberationist perspective, who function as scholar activists, concerned with changing the world toward more just social structures. The SCE should never participate in an either/or dichotomy. Both are needed and both have problems, the former leading to navel gazing, the latter bending toward paternalism for those with whom they should stand in solidarity.

A division exists in where some who are more concerned with the importance of having more sessions revolving around the thoughts and ideas of dead white ethicists (and those soon to join them), dismiss those who do ethics as scholar-activists. The call for the church and Christians not to be involved in the politics of our society and solely limit their involvement to the polity that is the church, a church that more often than not is homogenous, misses the mark. Not surprisingly, it has become popular among comfortable Euroamerican churches (and churches of marginalized communities seeking assimilation) and the ethicists from said churches to preach a Gospel that requires no quest for justice. The primary task of the church is, and must

⁴ Robert N. Bellah, "Is There a Common American Culture?" in *The Journal for the American Academy of Religion* 66, No. 3 (Fall 1998), 616-17.

⁵ The use of the words "blink" and "wink" gives homage to Clifford Geertz; see "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," in *The Interpretations of Culture: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 6.

be, to bring the world closer to the ideal reign of God as envisioned in the Gospels, fully aware of the hopelessness of falling short.⁶ To ignore the primary task of the church is to commit to following the practices of Jesus' distractors who voided his teachings concerning God for the sake of some orthodox tradition.

The SCE nullifies the "Christian" in its name by circumventing Jesus' teaching concerning justice with a sectarian call to simply be the church, to simply be analytical, or simply construct some personal piety code of virtues. In a perverted twist of scripture, the argument is made that emphasizing justice, as a primary norm that guides the Christian witness, is a mistake.⁷ I continue to argue ethics as doing, as praxis, more so than simply thinking. Both are needed, but I fear the accepted norm is the dismissal of those who focus on the doing as lacking academic rigor.

Hence, I remain hopeless about the future of the SCE because there exists a lack of will to transform the guild so as to face 2020. The SCE is good at promoting diversity without fostering it, a task that takes much time and energy. We have become good at "talking" about the need for diversity. We create ad hoc committees, organize summits, and develop focus groups. Just keep talking. Talk. Talk. Talk. Create so many comprehensive plans, strategies, and initiatives that everyone will be busy meeting, talking and scheduling more meetings to talk some more.

⁶ For several years now, I have been working on what I call a Theology of Hopelessness; see "Doing Latina/o Ethics from the Margins of Empire: Liberating the Colonized Mind," in *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 33, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2013), 9-10.

⁷ Stanley Hauerwas, *After Christendom? How the Church Is to Behave if Freedom, Justice, and a Christian Nation Are Bad Ideas* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 45.

While some continuously propose defunding Working Groups of Color, we continue to use phrases like, “How can we do better?” and “We have a profound commitment to diversity.” Keep the meetings going on for years if possible, making the symbolic inroad now and then to show “progress.” I’m reminded that Martin Luther King, Jr.’s letter from a Birmingham jail was not addressed to the Bull Connors of his time. He wrote his letter to religious liberals who prided themselves in “getting it.” These liberals, then and now, are quick to advise us to tone down the rhetoric, to be patient, to wait. Our outspokenness is pushing away potential allies. So the search is on for the right/white person of color who could least influence the ethos of the organization.⁸

If we are to have a glimmer of hope for the SCE, then we need to move beyond the mythology that those who are present with those on the underside of power and privilege somehow are lowering academic standards. Ironically, due to double, if not multiple consciousness (à la Du Bois), the scholar activist probably has a better grasp of reality than those who make a preferential option for their cushy armchairs located at lofty academic institutions. For the field of ethics to have a future, we who call ourselves ethicists must learn to first choose or will the good as understood by those on our margins over seeking the modernity project of knowing the good or truth, as if we have the hubris to figure good or truth out. For the SCE to have relevance, to have a future, requires moving beyond the dominant ethical scholarship that sees social ethics as an enlightenment error. Yes--let me be clear--the first task of Christian social ethics is to make the ‘world’ better and more just. Although it is noble to envision how character ought to be seen and intended, and how said character might influence behavior that might bring

⁸ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: Penguin Books, 1964), 76.

about change, it is only through praxis geared at dismantling the power and privilege bestowed upon Euroamericans and their churches that character develops. For what good is a virtuous character if oppressive structures remain? Just as faith without works is dead (James 2:20), so too are right virtues without right praxis meaningless.

Sorry, but the church is not a social ethic.⁹ Failure to engage in social ethics simply makes the church a place where like-minded individuals gather to feel good about themselves, no better than a social club. An ethics of presence,¹⁰ a radical solidarity with those suffering on the margins, is what would make the second step of our analysis, reflection, crucial in developing critical thought for a hurting world. And while there are those who are quick to dismiss liberation theology as a fad, I argue today that whatever you care to label the ethics occurring on the margins, that ethics is the future, and continuing to marginalize it within the SCE will result in

⁹ This statement is an obvious critique of Stanley Hauerwas' often stated quote, "the church does not have a social ethic; the church is a social ethic." See *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 1983), 99.

¹⁰ An ethics of place is a concept that I am highlighting in my upcoming book with the tentative title: *The U.S. Immigration Crises: Toward an Ethics of Place*, to be released in the Summer of 2016. An ethics of place recognizes that as an organic intellectual, I reflect on the praxis of those who are actually in the midst of oppression as a response to the injustices forced upon them and upon those who place their bodies on the line so as to be in solidarity with the dispossessed. My job as a scholar of ethics is to reflect upon the praxis in which those seeking justice engage. I dishonor them when I try to fit their actions into some predetermined theory that neatly orders my worldview. Instead, I should seek to give voice and a language to what already is occurring – even when the voice given is as messy and contradictory as the actions they are taking. What I, and my fellow liberative scholars do in the classroom is not praxis. After all, we get paid to do this in relative safety. This is not to dismiss or disregard what we do, for it is important work, helping to highlight issues that are usually lost in the static of the everyday; but we should never delude ourselves into thinking that somehow we are engaged by simply reflecting on what "those poor people must go through." An ethics of place insists that the scholar be present, to also occupy the space of the marginalized and their allies. Absence denies the scholar of any gravitas. Only when I am in the moment, seeing what they see, can I better understand in what actions to accompany them. How can I write if I do not walk or worship with them? If I refuse to be *presente*, I simply will be another clueless ignoramus who somehow believes that my academic credentials are all that is needed to know and understand. An ethics of place is what makes me an ethicist, what provides gravitas to my voice, not because I am somehow smarter, but because I chose to learn from the disenfranchised and their allies.

the SCE's own marginalization within the more colorful society of tomorrow. We are not asking for the margins to occupy the center; rather, for the center to join the margins where salvation flourishes. Whatever ethics will be in the future, it can only be derived from occupying the same physical space of the disenfranchised, and in turn, having what we learn from them shape the academic work we conduct in our guild.