

## **Moral Theology from a European Perspective. Emerging Methodologies.**

***Attentive to tradition and learning from Asia.***

**Raphael Gallagher**

What is emerging from Europe in moral theology today can only be understood in the light of the discipline sixty years ago, on the eve of the Second Vatican Council. A narrative of those years, in broad strokes, reveals an analytic point of great importance. From a standard and generally accepted univocal methodology sixty years ago in Europe, we now have a plurality of methodologies. The scope of this article is to tell that narrative, in general terms: only when we understand that European moral theologians have abandoned a once dominant methodology for a plurality of approaches can we begin to see what we, here in Europe, can learn from Asia.

### ***A question of method.***

On the eve of the Second Vatican Council the dominating method of moral theology was that of the manuals which had barely changed in a two hundred year period. It is important to remember that these

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manuals dealt with complex issues – in justice, in medical ethics and in sexuality: it would be unfair to imply that today's moral theologians are prepared to analyse the tough issues while their ancestors of the manuals were not. But what has changed is the *method* which moral theology uses to reach the truth of complicated problems. As a first step, therefore, we need to have clarity on the method of the dominating manuals.

By method, I understand the content, aims and sources of a particular science. Moral theology, as a theological science, developed the manuals as a secure way of training future priest-confessors for the juridical administration of the sacraments in general and that of the sacrament of confession, as it was then generally called, in particular. Taking the elements of method in turn this meant, firstly, that moral theology was extremely practical in its content. It was necessary to know, for instance, the practical details of justice so that one could properly identify the type of sin that might be involved in acts of injustice like stealing, breach of contract or failure in restitution. There would have been no confrontation with issues of social justice, for instance, as this was not considered to fall directly under the ambit of sins to be analysed and confessed. This content conditioned the second element of my description of method: its aim. The aim of moral theology was to train future priests to *administer the sacraments in a juridically correct way*. Details of rubrics were the important point: there would have been no discussion of the theological *celebration of the sacraments* as Mysteries of the presence of Christ the Sacrament in his Church. The content and aim logically led to the third element of the method of the manuals, as I have described it: the sources used. These were almost exclusively taken from Canon Law or from the Ordinary Magisterium, interpreted in a mainly literalist way. Sacred Scripture or dogmatic theology would not have been considered as sources to shape the science of moral theology in any significant sense.

I do not give this description of the manuals with the intent of vilifying them. The manuals were subtle, developed over a period of three centuries, and written by intelligent and committed priests. What the manuals shared, with minor differences between the dominant schools of theology (Jesuit, Dominicans, Franciscan and Redemptorist) was a common method. It was focussed on the analysis of sin, taught exclusively to future priests and legalistic in tone and presentation. Then came the Second Vatican Council.

For my narrative it is important to take two well known quotations from the Council to explain the emerging methodologies of today. *“In like manner the other theological subjects should be reviewed through a more vivid contact with the Mystery of Christ and the history of salvation. Special care should be given to the perfecting of moral theology. Its scientific presentation should draw more fully on the teaching of Holy Scripture, and should throw light on the exalted vocation of the faithful and their obligation to draw forth fruit in charity for the life of the world”.*<sup>1</sup> *“Having set forth the dignity of the human person and his individual and social role in the universe, the Council now draws the attention of people to the consideration of some more urgent problems deeply affecting the human race at the present time in the light of the Gospel and of human experience.”*<sup>2</sup> The first quotation refers to the training of priests, but it retains its importance for moral theology even when (as now) it is not only priests who study it: the second quotation has a wider pastoral scope, and may be more important when we come to consider what European moral theologians can learn from Asia.

The cumulative effect of these Council decisions was immediate and quite devastating for the method of the manuals. Sourced in Scripture, oriented towards charity, centred on Christian vocation and taking human experience into account: the contrast with being sourced in legal terms, oriented towards the specification of sin, centred on obedience to clerical control and using natural law could hardly be more obvious. The collapse of the manuals was sudden, dramatic and with consequences still to be worked out. I focus on one aspect for the purposes of this article: a univocal method in moral theology was replaced by a plurality of methods.

### **The necessity of new methods.**

European moral theologians, to their credit, took the challenge implicit in the Council decisions with great seriousness. I highlight four aspects of their initial work, mainly from the 1960's and 1970's, to show the elements that had to be theologically re-analysed in order to forge new methodologies for moral theology.

Firstly, there is the role of law in moral theology. In the manuals, as I have generally described them, this role was confined to the application of law through casuistry. Law remains a central concept

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<sup>1</sup> *Optatum totius (Decree on the Training of Priests)* 16 (A: Flannery Translation).

<sup>2</sup> *Gaudium et spes (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World)* 46 (A: Flannery Translation).

of the moral life, but it was immediately obvious after the Council that the narrowly legalistic framework in which moral norms were formulated by the manuals could not succeed in communicating, in an adequate anthropological way, the intricate relationship between the law of the nature of the human person with the general human vocation to morality of people called to live in a world that was increasingly secular and non-religious in reference. A revisiting of the relationship between law and morality meant that the method of doing such, as proposed by the manuals, was no longer adequate.

Secondly, there was an urgent need to consider the historical development of moral norms. It is an irony of the history of theology that doctrinal development was a concept that had become generally acceptable, but the implication that there could be moral development was seen as dangerous and inimical to objective morality. Consider, again, that the form of the manuals had changed but little in a three hundred year period: against this, recall a few of the developments in the world in that period – the American, French and Industrial Revolutions, the new knowledge we gained about the origin and development of sexuality, the incredible advances in medicine from transplants to cloning to stem cell research, the move from colonialism to neo-colonialism and globalisation. It would have been impossible for the type of norms, as given by the manuals, to do justice to an analysis of the consequences of these developments. To claim that there is a necessary development within morality is a different affirmation from saying that there is no such thing as objective morality. The explanation is, I admit, difficult, but European moral theologians took the lead in showing that there had, in fact, been development within moral theology in the past and, therefore, this could be possible in the future as well.<sup>3</sup>

Notable is the third element in the reconstruction of moral theological method: the emerging awareness of the social dimension of morality. The Magisterium, in fairness, was more advanced on this front than moral theology: from *Rerum novarum* (1891) to the recently published encyclical of Pope Benedict 16<sup>th</sup> *Caritas in veritate* (2009) there is a developmental awareness of what came to be called ‘the social

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<sup>3</sup> A leading figure in this process was L. Vereecke, who celebrated his 90th birthday on March 25th of this year. Some of his important work is contained in *De Guillaume d’Ockham à Saint Alphonse de Liguori*, Rome, 1986. Confirmation of some of this research can be found in another important book by a European moral theologian: J. Mahoney, *The Making of Moral Theology. A Study of the Roman Catholic Tradition*, Oxford, 1987.

question'. But this was not matched by the manuals which continued to be individualistic in tone and framed for the purposes of sacramental confession. European moral theologians may not have been as prominent as, say, their Latin American colleagues in adjusting the method of moral theology to include the intrinsic social element, but there were some notable attempts in this direction.<sup>4</sup>

The fourth element which European moral theologians took in earnest in their search for a renewed method was to replace the sin-obsession of the manuals with a moral theology that was life-enhancing and focussed on charity. No moral theologian denied the reality of sin, as this would be a contradiction of a central truth of our faith. But sin was placed in a more correct perspective in moral analysis, along the lines of the Pauline truth that where sin abounded, grace did more abound.<sup>5</sup>

### **An initial evaluation of the emerging methodologies.**

With the directions given to moral theology by the Second Vatican Council, implied in the quotations above, it was correct that European moral theologians began to take the above methodological shifts with great seriousness. Some of the notable European moral theologians to do so were B. Häring,<sup>6</sup> F. Böckle,<sup>7</sup> J. Fuchs,<sup>8</sup> E. McDonagh,<sup>9</sup> among others. Reading their works, now, one can see their incompleteness, but it is crucial to remember that they were working under severe limitations of time: the manual system, honed over a three hundred year period, could not be replaced in a completely satisfactory way

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<sup>4</sup> I would highlight the work of R. Coste in particular, whose life-dedication to this aspect of morality is well synthesised in his *Les dimensions sociales de la foi*, Paris, 2000.

<sup>5</sup> The move towards a charity centred morality had begun before the Council (one remembers with gratitude the Belgian Jesuit who devoted his life to India in his *The Primacy of Charity in Moral Theology*, Westminster MD., 1959) but it was only after the Council that moral theologians began to draw out the implications of this theological position with regard to the re-evaluation of sin in the method of moral theology, evident in authors like K. Kelly, S. Fagan, X. Thévenot among others.

<sup>6</sup> Confer his *Free and Faithful in Christ*, 3 Volumes, Slough, 1978 ff.

<sup>7</sup> His most widely read book was *Fundamentalmoral*, Munich, 1977 which was translated into the main European languages.

<sup>8</sup> An accessible introduction to his complex thought can be found in *Christian Ethics in a Secular Age*, Dublin, 1984.

<sup>9</sup> A prolific author, McDonagh's most original contribution to the renewal of the method of moral theology is his *Gift and Call. Towards a Christian Theology of Morality*, Dublin, 1975.

almost overnight. These theologians from Europe should be given great credit for their sincere and scholarly efforts to develop new and diverse methodologies, in the broad lines of the conciliar renewal, so that moral theology could respond better to the urgent needs of a Europe that was fast changing in political, economic and cultural terms.

The judgment on these theological efforts by European theologians was not as positively assessed, as I am doing, by the school of thought closely associated with the ordinary Magisterium of the Church. This negative reaction is a necessary part of the narrative that shapes this article: the move from a univocal manual methodology to a plurality of methodologies. There is little doubt that the publication of the Papal Encyclical *Humanae vitae* (1968) was the catalyst for a dividing line among European moral theologians from that time forward. The encyclical was not just about one particular issue (contraception) but raised a series of debates that touched on the most fundamental questions of method in moral theology.<sup>10</sup>

These fundamental questions were hotly debated within the limits of two broad schools of thought, and focussed on what was (if anything) specific to Christian morality. The first school can be broadly referred to as the autonomy school of moral theology which defended the position that morality, as a human phenomenon, was shared by all who claimed human personhood: as such the material norms of morality, being based on autonomous human personhood, were shared in common by all people, whether Christian or not.<sup>11</sup> In so far as there was something specific to Christian morality, it was at the level of transcendental intention. The opposing school, often called the faith-school of moral theology, claimed that this autonomous position reduced Christian morality to the minimum of interior intention and did not give weight to the possibility of material norms and actions being distinctively Christian.<sup>12</sup>

This division of methodological opinion is a first indication of the narrative theme of this article: there was no longer a shared univocal

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<sup>10</sup> The recently published book by D. Vincent Twomey, *Moral Theology after Humanae Vitae: Fundamental Issues in Moral Theory and Sexual Ethics*, Dublin, 2010 confirms this impression.

<sup>11</sup> A. Auer, *Autonome Moral und Christlicher Glaube*, Düsseldorf, 1971 was one of the major exponents of this position.

<sup>12</sup> J. Ratzinger, "The Church's teaching Authority – Faith – Morals", in H. Schürmann – J. Ratzinger – H- Urs Von Balthassar, (editors) *Principles of Christian Morality*, San Francisco, 1980, pages 47 – 71 is in this line. (Original German edition: *Prinzipien Christlicher Moral*, Einsiedeln, 1975.)

method in European moral theology by the 1970's. The debate touched on the implications of the four elements which I have considered necessary as a result of the Council decisions, but took them to a deeper level. Indeed, one can now say, with hindsight, that the debate touched on the decisive elements of moral theology: conscience, freedom, norms, intrinsically evil actions, law, fundamental option and choice. Leaving aside the general lines of the debate (autonomy ethics, faith-based ethics) it can now be seen that these debates, as they occurred in Europe, were about such profound issues that, by the late 1980's, there were two general methods in moral theology, opposed to each other, and interpreting the basics of moral theology in radically opposed ways. The problem was not so much the choice of method available but that one of the methods (that associated with the autonomy proponents) was considered by the ordinary Magisterium to be proposing a method of moral theology no longer compatible with the tradition of the Church. Attentiveness to tradition is the sub-title of this article, and I judge the publication of *Veritas splendor*<sup>13</sup> as a call to moral theologians to assess the current state of moral theology precisely in the light of tradition. Though the encyclical was not addressed to European moral theologians only, its contents reflect those fundamental issues mentioned above and which were predominantly European in origin. One can note this in the themes of the second chapter of the encyclical: freedom and law, conscience and truth, fundamental choice and specific kinds of behaviour, the moral act.

### **The desire for a rapprochement between opposing methods.**

It has become gradually clear that the divisive debates in European moral theology in the 1970's and 1980's was not helping the project of the renewal of moral theology in our continent: the major problem was that, in the heat of the theological battles, the core questions of the identity of morality for Christians was not being positively addressed, at all its levels.<sup>14</sup> It is important to note that *Veritatis splendor* while calling for a review of some positions not considered

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<sup>13</sup> Encyclical Letter of Pope John Paul 2nd, Vatican City, 1993

<sup>14</sup> There is a scholarly presentation of these debates, and the 'forgotten issue' (as I am calling it) in Ann Marie Mealey, *The Identity of Christian Morality*, Surrey, 2009. The book is a very fair minded presentation of both the autonomy and faith-based approaches to morality but uses the hermeneutical insights of Paul Ricoeur to suggest a way out of what had become a theological *cul de sac* and points the way forward to a more inclusive approach to the identity of Christian morality.

compatible with the great tradition of the Church, did not try to impose a single methodology on European (or, indeed, other) moral theologians: “*Certainly the Church’s Magisterium does not intend to impose upon the faithful any particular theological system, still less a philosophical one*”.<sup>15</sup> It is one thing to exclude certain methods as not compatible with the truth of the tradition: it is quite another to say that a plurality of methods is a theoretic possibility. In my judgment, it is at this juncture we now are at in European moral theology: the consideration and validation of different legitimate methods.

### **Some shared positions and some contrasting methodologies.**

Before I present what I consider to be the important (and acceptable) methodologies now available within European moral theology it is important, firstly, to note the points on which I think there is general agreement, even if with slightly different nuances. There are three areas I would highlight.

The theological nature of moral theology is no longer a disputed question. This is a gain of notable proportion, given that at the beginning of the period of this narrative, moral theology was more akin to a canonical or legal science than one in continuity with the tradition of *sacra doctrina*. The sense of Holy Scripture as the soul of all theology applies also to moral theology, and I can think of no European moralist who would dispute the essentially theological nature of our discipline. This is observable in material ways (for instance, the distancing of moral theology from dogmatic and spiritual theology has been overcome) but its main fruit is an interior structuring of our science as intrinsic to the search for God in our lives or, perhaps more accurately, God’s search for us in the muddled waters of our moral dilemmas. Following on this is the broad acceptance that the sources of morality are interior to the human person. Again, this is in sharp contrast to the position at the start of the narrative where morality was considered as something to be imposed on people through external authority. I am avoiding the term ‘personalist moral theology’ because of the yet unclear meaning of what the term ‘person’ actually refers to: I am stressing the general agreement on the interior sourcing of moral insight and discernment as distinctive of moral theology. This, obviously, is quite different to saying that moral theology is a private matter of insight and discernment: all I have said about the social and historical nature of moral theology, in the wake of the Council, would contradict that argument. The third generally agreed position is that moral theology

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<sup>15</sup> *Veritatis splendor*, 29.



is a practical theological science. By this I mean that European moral theologians take with great seriousness the experience of life, faith based and not, as a source of moral wisdom and a necessary component of how one constructs any subsequent moral theory. Of course, European moral theologians do not ignore other sources of wisdom, like the theoretic basis of *phronesis*, but there is a gathering consensus that no genuine moral theology in Europe can ignore the variety of individual and social experiences that shape our lives. Once again, this is a gain compared to where moral theology was at the beginning of our narrative in this article: experience, if mentioned at all, was an area of *application* for moral theology but not a source. Experience, of course, has to be sifted (“in the light of the Gospel and of human experience”) but this necessary sifting does not detract from its importance.

If these are the broad points of agreement among European moral theologians, what are the emerging and acceptable methodologies that I would note among European moral theologians? I mention four, in a rather schematic way, in order to underline the basic thread of this article: moral theology in Europe has moved from a univocal casuistic method written in manual form, to weighing the choices inherent in different methodological choices. I will call these ‘systems of moral theology’ to highlight the scientific structure that each of them implies, and to sharpen the questions a particular moral theologian has to answer before choosing one system over another.

(a) *Moral theology is a science developed primarily from revelatory sources with a view to providing the necessary Christian means to reach happiness through our moral choices and actions.*

There are a number of varieties on this definition, but perhaps S. Pinckaers provides the fullest account that is close to this vision of moral theology.<sup>16</sup> The primary concern of this system of moral theology is for the integrity of Christian moral teaching as the surest guide to a life of beatitude and discipleship.

(b) *Moral theology is a science developed primarily from the ethical insights of human intelligence and practical reasoning with the aim of explaining human fulfilment in our Christian vocation.*

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<sup>16</sup> Confer the definition of moral theology given by S. Pinckaers in *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, Edinburgh, 1995, 8.

<sup>17</sup> Among the European authors who would come close to certain aspects of this system is V. MacNamara as explained in his *The Truth in Love*, Dublin, 1988 and in his *Faith and Ethics: Recent Roman Catholicism*, Dublin, 1985.

Again, there are varieties on this system, though what they have in common is a trust in practical reasoning and a deep concern that morality for Christians be intelligible and accessible even outside the institutional confines of the Church.<sup>17</sup>

(c) *Moral theology is a science developed primarily through a dialectical and hermeneutical use of its various sources with a view to communicating the essence of the tradition to a new cultural situation.*

The major concern of this method of doing moral theology is faithfulness to the tradition but done in a freshly constructed coherent way so that what is recovered from the tradition can be communicated in a new cultural setting.<sup>18</sup>

(d) *Moral theology is a science that deals in a specific way with the salvation questions provoked by the moral dilemmas of life with a view to offering a way of discernment, through prudence, to enable a person to continue on the way that leads to salvation in Christ.*

Those who follow such a broad method would be concerned with a double- question that represents two sides of the one coin. One starts with the pastoral – practical dilemmas of life, not for its own sake, but so that one can discern the path that leads a person from the joys and tragedies of life to an experience of God’s love for us even in the midst of a messy existence.<sup>19</sup>

I have given, in a synthetic systematic way, four different methodologies that I note in current European moral writing. No one, to my knowledge, would take my definitions as totally representing their position: I am aiming, simply, at indicating that the general theme of this article (from a univocal method sixty years ago to a plurality of methodologies now) is in fact verifiable. Others could be added.<sup>20</sup> It is also important to note that I am not offering these methodologies as ‘alternatives’: those concerned with the integrity of the faith will also be concerned with its intelligibility, and so on.

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<sup>18</sup> An interesting exponent of this general approach (though with his own emphases) is G. Angelini, *Teologia Morale Fondamentale. Tradizione, Scrittura e teoria*, Milan, 1999.

<sup>19</sup> Some Redemptorist authors in Europe (for instance: S. Majorano, M. Vidal, J. Römelt) could be located in this general approach, though there are again, notable differences of emphases between such authors.

<sup>20</sup> For a different and stimulating alternative assessment of what is happening in European moral theology, confer A. Bonandi, *Veritatis splendor: Trent’anni di teologia morale*, Milan, 1996.

## And learning from Asia?

The precondition for learning from another context is respect for the experience and thought expressed in it. This is particularly true when one considers the possibility of European moral theologians learning from their Asian colleagues. It is a notable precondition because of a factor peculiar to both continents, though in different ways. 'Europe' is a vast continent and its meaning is not immediately clear: for instance, in this article I have ignored, because of space, the realities of Eastern Europe. The complexities of Asia appear even greater to the outsider, given its diversity of cultures, religions and traditions. European moral theologians, by respecting the diversity within their own continent, must transfer this respect in an analogous way to Asian writing on moral theology.

This will not be as easy as a mere assertion of respect may imply. There is an undercurrent of suspicion about some of the theological ideas promoted in Asian circles, particularly the idea of mystery and negative theology, the high evaluation given to the plurality of experience and the very possibility of inter-religious dialogue. Clarification is always necessary in theological discourse, but the first step in respect for Asian moral theology may be the simple but crucial one of European moral theologians over-coming their ignorance of and bias towards theology 'out of Asia.'<sup>21</sup> From this attitude of respect we may be able to go beyond the level of assertion to a more analytical agenda for what European moral theologians may learn from Asia. I suggest the notion of 'culture' as the more promising route, given the complexities of both Europe and Asia. The idea of culture is still largely unexplored, perhaps because of the lack clarity in its definition.<sup>22</sup> Nonetheless, because it is a key chapter in *Gaudium et spes*, from which I have already quoted, it might provide a common fertile ground in the dialogue of European moral theologians with their Asian counterparts.

The dialectical relationship between culture and morality needs some specification. I have already indicated a number of different methodologies in European moral theology, and the choice of definition will surely influence which aspect of culture will be taken

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<sup>21</sup> A useful starting point might be F. Wilfred, "Towards a better Understanding of Asian Theology", in *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 62 (1988) 890 – 915.

<sup>22</sup> In their seminal study, A. Kroeber and C. Kluckhohn (*Culture: A critical Review of Concepts and Definitions*, Cambridge, 1952) identified over 300 differing definitions or descriptions of culture.

into account. Whatever the choices, I believe there are a number of conditions necessary for the cross-cultural hermeneutics of dialogue between moral theologians of both continents. These are: a praxis of mutual recognition between the varieties of moral theology and culture in both continents, an affirmation of diversity as potentially up-building for the tradition of the Church universal, an acceptance of plurality (especially as regards the philosophical categories used in moral theology), a positive attitude towards the dynamic reality of development within moral tradition, and a conviction that no culture being superior *per se* to another culture, there is a possibility of resolving differences between cultures that might at first seem incommensurable. I believe that Asian theologians have made greater progress on these preconditions than their European colleagues, and this could be what we in Europe may learn from them in moral theology.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> The background to these preconditions owe much to the article of C. Duraisingh, "Contextual and Catholic: Cross-Cultural Hermeneutics", in *Anglican Theological Review* 82/4 1998 680 – 701.