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Non-Discrimination from a Christian Ethical Perspective

Ragies Gunda Massiiwa

Introduction

Christianity is a multi-faceted religious tradition that can best be described as united in diversity, having a common uniting feature—the belief in Jesus Christ—yet with various points of differences seen through the multiple denominations or confessions. It is not far-fetched to speak of competition among the various Christian confessions that are in existence, with more being born every year.

Further, Christianity co-exists with many other religious traditions, bringing about elements of competition between Christianity and these other traditions, especially those that are proselytizing and even those that are non-proselytizing but in whose territories Christianity seeks converts. Most religious traditions, including Christianity, claim possession of exclusive truth, exclusive access to the means of salvation, creating a hard and fast dividing line between believers and non-believers. This demarcation has made religions culprits and fermenters of conflict in societies across the world. Conflict fuels discrimination of some people by others; the world has seen a fair share of discrimination on religious grounds over and above many other variables that have been cited in cases of discrimination, such as gender, race, ethnicity, language, culture, disability, and political affiliation.

That Christianity, like most other religious traditions, has sponsored, justified, and entrenched discrimination in many societies, and sometimes even within families, cannot be disputed. In specific contexts, Christianity has been a perpetrator of discrimination, has supported actions of perpetrators, and has even theologized in support of discrimination. Quick examples, such as apartheid in South Africa, colonization across the world, and dispossession and displacement of Indigenous Peoples in North America through the Doctrine of Discovery come to mind. However, this is not the whole story of Christianity and discrimination: there were also instances when Christian voices were central in challenging discriminatory practices and promoting

non-discrimination. In fact, the ecumenical movement arose at a time when some Christians were clearly uncomfortable with the multiple discriminations that were being ordained by the churches in various parts of the world. Central to the ecumenical movement's life and work has been this question: What is the Christian right way or the wrong way of responding to what is happening around us? José Miguez Bonino express this view succinctly:

> It is not surprising that the ecumenical movement has been deeply involved in the consideration of ethical issues. Changes in the relations of production and political organization, new cultural trends and the ideological struggles of the modern world raised a number of questions for which the traditional theological and ethical repertoire of the confessional churches had no ready-made answers and frequently not even the instruments or disposition for understanding.[1]

Discrimination has been a gigantic by-product of identity politics in human history. While identity, in and of itself, is a good thing in most cases, it has been used as a basis for discrimination. According to the United Nations:

> the term discrimination . . . should be understood to imply any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference which is based on any ground such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status, *and which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by all persons, on an equal footing, of all rights and freedoms.*[2]

As will be shown through this contribution, Christianity is an ethical religious tradition that has some standards that determine what is right and wrong in what Christians do in their everyday lives. Among the central principles that Christians generally agree on when considering the right response in specific instances are "respect for persons, beneficence, non-

1. José Miguez Bonino, "Ethics," in *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, ed. N. Lossky, J. M. Bonino, J. Pobee, T. F. Stransky, G. Wainwright, and P. Webb (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2002), 406.

2. OHCHR and IBA, Human Rights in the Administration of Justice: A Manual on Human Rights for Judges, Prosecutors and Lawyers (New York: United Nations, 2003), 651.

maleficence, and justice."[3] Even as we highlight these principles, we are aware that there is significant tension on how these principles are to be applied, especially toward resolving contemporary ethical challenges. The resources or sources that should inform the ethics and the weighting of each of such sources further complicate Christian ethical perspectives. Among the possible sources are the Bible, church tradition, reason, and scientific or empirical data. Another challenge is posed by whether, in deciding what is right or wrong, one should consider the consequences or results of action to be taken or whether one should look at the action irrespective of its consequences. In the context of this paper, is discrimination right or wrong in and of itself, or is it right or wrong because of its consequences? Is it possible to have an absolute Christian ethical perspective on discrimination and non-discrimination?

Christian Ethics

A study of this nature cannot even attempt to be exhaustive about Christian ethics. However, it is important to highlight the key issues we need to bear in mind as we seek to understand how discrimination and non-discrimination are to be understood from a Christian ethical perspective. Christianity, like all other religious traditions, is based upon ethical tenets that govern relationships and conduct, "such as the duty to widen the bounds of good-neighbourliness and the obligation to meet human need in the broadest sense."[4] By ethics, we refer to the systematic questioning of what is right and wrong about human conduct; such ethical values are then widely propagated in communities so that the conduct of the individual is measured against that which has been agreed upon by society or, in the case of Christianity, that which has been prescribed by God.[5] Every Christian is expected to make ethical choices throughout their life, both at a personal level as well as at a communal level.

> Christians make ethical choices in accordance with certain principles, which follow from their understanding of the biblical witness and their faith convictions. These are stated in various ways by different Christians and Christian traditions, but they are likely to include the following points:

3. World Council of Churches, *Chapter 4: Ethical Perspectives* (1 January 1970), https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/chapter-4-ethical-perspectives.

4. Arcot Krishnaswami, Study of Discrimination in the Matter of Religious Rights and Practices (New York: United Nations, 1960).

5. WCC, Chapter 4.

> because all human beings are created and beloved by God, Christians are called to treat every person as of infinite value;
>
> because Christ died to reconcile all to God, Christians are called to work for true reconciliation—which includes justice—among those alienated one from another;
>
> because we are "members one of another," being built up by the Spirit into one body, Christians are called to responsible life within community.[6]

Sources for Christian ethics

In the history of Christianity, and in particular Christian ethics, different sources have been used to arrive at ethical positions, namely, the Bible, tradition, reason, and, lately, scientific or empirical data. These sources have not been used uniformly across the various confessions that we commonly recognize as Christian. What cannot be contested is that all Christian confessions do acknowledge the Bible, even if the results of their use of the Bible produce varied ethical solutions, sometimes even contradictory solutions. There are those groups that believe that what is written in the Bible is prescriptive and universal, hence "what is said in the Bible is immediately applied to today's situation."[7] Longenecker sums up this perspective well: "It argues that God has given prescriptive laws in the form of commandments and ordinances, which can be found in both the Old and New Testaments. If people want to know what they should do, the laws of God stand objectively before them in written form, and they have only to refer to them."[8]

While most Christians identify with this thinking, it has in many instances fed discriminatory elements in the church and beyond. This is a perspective that largely disregards the socio-historical environment that produced these biblical ideas and principles, meaning that these ideas and principles need to be understood in their historical contexts before they can be appropriately applied in contemporary situations. Differences in approaches to the Bible and tradition are responsible for hampering the churches' witness because they produce considerable disagreement within the Christian community on

6. WCC, Chapter 4.
7. P. J. Hartin, "Christian Biblical Ethics: The Application of Biblical Norms Today," *Koers* 56:3 (March 1991), 425–45.
8. Richard N. Longenecker, *New Testament Social Ethics for Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 2.

how to approach certain ethical issues, threatening the spirit of "unity in diversity" which characterizes the ecumenical movement.[9]

The disagreement between confessions is further deepened by the existence of different traditions for these communities, emanating from differences dating back to the ethical perspectives of the church fathers.

> Some of the problems faced by the early church already began to shape its 'ethos'. How, for instance, were the Christians to respond to their pagan environment, even though they considered the worship of the pagans to be meaningless? This was more than a moot question when we consider that service in the military of the Roman Empire was a quasi-religious occasion that included the performance of many pagan rituals. Should Christians partake of such goings-on? Was it the role of Christians to transform the world or to flee from it? Many of the 'desert fathers' gave a clear answer to this question via their lifestyle, while those who remained behind sometimes had to face the challenge of martyrdom. Or more delicately, what was the community to do about those Christians who could not face martyrdom and who apparently or really lapsed in their faith?[10]

The differences that resulted in some opting for withdrawal from the world while others thought of transforming the world from within can be seen as alternative ethical responses to the challenges of that period. Church traditions, therefore, do not provide a single coherent approach to ethical dilemmas.

Since the world is made up of not only Christians, basing ethical reflections exclusively on the Bible and church tradition has the effect of absolving non-Christians of ethical conformity and responsibilities. This also has the effect of excluding non-Christians from the house of God. To counter this, it was widely accepted in Christian circles that moral laws or ethical principles are universally available to all persons because they are discernible by reason and experience; they are innate in all human beings and therefore binding on all.[11] The assumption is that when all human beings sufficiently apply their reason, they will arrive at the same ethical solutions, but experience teaches us this

9. WCC, Chapter 4.

10. Joseph A. Selling, "Ethics in the Early Church," Christian Ethics website, https://theo.kuleuven.be/apps/christian-ethics/history/early.html.

11. Steve Wilkins, ed. Christian Ethics: Four Views. Spectrum Multiview Books (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2017).

is far from true. Even reason has not produced a coherent ethical response to challenging situations. This use of reason is closely connected to the prominence given to natural sciences, especially as there is an assumption that data produced in the natural sciences is objective. There are some who now consider such data to be a source for ethical reflections: this has been the case in various areas including human sexuality, climate change, and racism. What is right or wrong can also be discerned through a critical engagement with scientific prescriptions. However, there is no unanimity among Christians as to the appropriateness of such an approach to ethical reflections within a Christian context.

Starting point for ethical reflections: Teleological and deontological

Without claiming to be exhaustive of the entire spectrum of ethical theories, it is safe to suggest that there are two major approaches or theories for ethical reflections. The theory that actions are right or wrong depending on the consequences that result from such actions is widely known as teleological theory.

> Teleological moral theories locate moral goodness in the consequences of our behaviour and not the behaviour itself. According to teleological (or consequentialist) moral theory, all rational human actions are teleological in the sense that we reason about the means of achieving certain ends. Moral behaviour, therefore, is goal-directed.[12]

While there are different ways in which teleological theories are articulated, they all agree on the point at which the question of right or wrong must be directed, that is, actions can only be evaluated from the perspective of their consequences. Acts are considered good, right, or moral if they lead to pleasure, communal profit, or realization of the common good or if they bring benefits to more people than they harm. Alternatively, acts are considered bad, wrong, or immoral if they lead to pain, they result in suffering, or they benefit fewer people than they deprive. The idea of using pleasure and pain as indicators of what is right or wrong is driven by the idea that universally, human beings seek pleasure and actively avoid pain.[13]

Many established authorities, philosophers, and scholars reject this teleological approach to ethics and morality by emphasizing that "moral

12. Ronald F. White, *Moral Inquiry* (Cincinnati: College of Mount St. Joseph, n.d), 11. https://faculty.msj.edu/whiter/ethicsbook.pdf.
13. White, *Moral Inquiry*, 12.

goodness has nothing to do with generating pleasure, happiness, and or consequences."[14] The argument is that we cannot decide what is right or wrong based on the consequences of the actions; instead, actions must be right or wrong irrespective of their consequences. This is referred to as deontological theories: their import is that what is moral, right, or good depends on the fulfilment of commonly agreed upon moral obligations or duties. Such duties are held to be absolute by communities, hence "the rightness or wrongness of a moral rule is determined independent of its consequences or how happiness or pleasure is distributed as a result of abiding by that rule, or not abiding by it."[15]

> Therefore, deontologists believe that right and wrong have nothing to do with pleasure, pain, or consequences. Morality is based on whether acts conflict with moral rules or not, and the motivation behind those acts. An act is therefore, good if and only if it was performed out of a desire to do one's duty and obey a rule. In other words, act out of a good will. Hence, slavery is wrong, not because of its negative consequences, but because it violates an absolute moral rule.[16]

A quick perusal of these two approaches or starting points for doing ethical reflections shows that they all do not leave us comfortable because there are subjective elements that make them impossible to fully enforce. If consequences are all that matters, can minorities ever feel safe and secure? How can the rights or the dignity of minorities be assured if the pleasure or benefit of the majority is all that counts for ethical reflections? Will this approach not make discrimination moral, right, or even good? When one looks at deontological theories, they all assume the existence of an absolute moral rule against which all actions are to be judged. The question is, where does such an absolute moral rule come from? Will this not empower a few elite and powerful persons to make their own rules, the same rule for everyone, in which they will benefit at the expense of everyone else? These questions are part of the basis that led to two other approaches, one of which is of interest for us in this paper, that is, the Kantian theory and the divine command theory. Below, we look at the Divine Command Theory.

14. White, *Moral Inquiry*, 15.
15. White, *Moral Inquiry*, 16.
16. White, *Moral Inquiry*, 16.

Divine command theory approach to Christian ethics

In the preceding section, we noted the inherent problems that lie at the heart of both the teleological and deontological theories of morality. It is important to open this section by highlighting the problem once again: Is it even possible to distinguish absolute moral rules from mere convention, prudence, or legality, and without reference to the distribution of pleasure and pain in relation to community members? These problems led to refined theories, as noted above. In this section, I will focus on the contributions of the divine command theory and evaluate how this approach can help us consider the ethics of non-discrimination from a Christian perspective.

> Divine Command Theory states that the moral goodness of an act is based on religious authority. Hence, for many Christians, killing another human being is wrong simply because it violates God's 6th commandment. In short, the rightness or wrongness of an act is based on the truthful pronouncements of an outside authority, that is to say, 'It is wrong because God or one of God's designated spokespersons said it is wrong.'[17]

Whereas we observed above that it is difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish between absolute moral rules and other cultural, political, or religious conventions, the divine command theory assumes this problem is solved by making absolute moral rules pronouncements by God. The Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:1-17; Deut. 5:6-21) and the Golden Rule, "Do to others as you would have them do to you" (Luke 6:31), have been cited as examples of absolute moral rules by Christians.[18]

> Dodd is an adherent of this interpretation. He draws a distinction between codes and precepts. Codes give detailed attention to every specific situation that could arise, whereas precepts, on the other hand, aim at giving a direction to one's actions (Curran, 1984, p. 181). A major impetus given to such an approach within the New Testament stems from the prescriptive way in which many of the words of the New Testament writers including those of Jesus himself are presented. When examining the statements of Jesus, pride of place is assigned to loving God (Mark 12:29-30 in quoting Deut. 6:4-5) and loving one's neighbour (Mark 12:31, quoting Lev. 19:18).[19]

17. White, *Moral Inquiry*, 16.
18. WCC, Chapter 4.
19. Hartin, "Christian Biblical Ethics," 426.

In fact, it is when Christians assign their ethical reflections to the heart of their faith—the belief in Jesus Christ, God the Father, and the Holy Spirit—that Christian ethics claim a distinctive identity separate from other non-Christian ethics.[20] The danger is when the Christian resources for ethical reflections are taken literally because of the multiplicity of injunctions, prescriptions, and ideas that are highly contextual to their time and difficult or impossible to apply elsewhere. While Christians in general will agree on this distinctive character of Christian ethics, it is true that "the churches' witness is hampered by the considerable disagreement within the Christian community on how to approach certain ethical issues, threatening the spirit of 'unity in diversity' which characterizes the ecumenical movement."[21] Clearly, what the Bible says and what has been inherited from church tradition and what human reason can process are all important for Christian ethical reflections; the critical point of departure from other forms of ethical reflections is not simply the infusion of God by Christians. Instead:

> The major difference lies in the very relation of the Christian to God. This relationship must certainly influence the way in which the Christian makes decisions. For the Christian the starting-point for ethical reflections lies in this relationship response. This, however, does not deny the value for the Christian of human ethical reflection on how other people live and give meaning to their existence . . . the aim of appropriation is not to take over simply the ideals or norms as specified in the Bible. Instead, one attempts to discover the direction opened up by the Bible, which points towards a relationship that is initiated between God and those whom he has called. This relationship brings with it the call to a response. The Christian believer is called upon to penetrate this meaning more fully in appropriating the biblical message.[22]

To this extent, it is possible that "if ethics is to reveal the practical reality of the nature of God in the here and now through his [one] church," then it is important to agree that Christian ethical reflections must "agree and affirm from scripture and our experiences that God is love, God loves mercy and righteousness, God is just; and that Jesus and the Holy Spirit will lead us into all truth . . . [according to] John 10:10—Jesus came to reveal the nature of

20. Hartin, "Christian Biblical Ethics."

21. WCC, Chapter 4.

22. Hartin, "Christian Biblical Ethics," 431–32.

God, a generous God, so that 'we may have life and have it abundantly'. Not some, but all."[23] In this context, Christian ethical reflections must consider ethical those actions that respect justice, love, and affirm life. This somehow brings the divine command theory to the Kantian theory, whose maxim is expressed in this way:

> The easiest way to understand what Kant has in mind is to focus on the Kantian imperative stating that we must "always treat persons as ends and never as means." He suggested that it's best to think of humanity as if it were a "kingdom" composed of "ends"; that is a kingdom of ends. When we treat persons as means to our own ends we essentially de-humanize them and devalue them to the level of mere things or property.[24]

It is at this point that Christian ethics, with its distinctive character and Western secular ethical theories, coalesce on the centrality of the well-being of human beings in ethical reflections; this can be expanded to include the environment. Therefore, any actions that threaten the well-being of human beings are to be understood as wrong because God has promised all, not some, "abundant life."

Discrimination

If we concluded the preceding section by noting that Christian ethical reflections must be guided by the commitment to "abundant life for all," how then does Christianity become complicit in discriminatory practices against not only non-Christians but other Christians as well? As we seek to answer this question, we will briefly begin by articulating what we mean by discrimination. In very simple terms, "discrimination means treating a person unfairly because of who they are or because they possess certain characteristics."[25] The United Nations has a more detailed definition of discrimination:

> With regard to the term 'discrimination' in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Human Rights Committee has stated its belief 'that the term discrimination' as used in the Covenant

23. T. Makgoba, "Ecclesiology and Ethics: A Critical Self-Reflection," *The Ecumenical Review* 67:4 (December 2015), 498–504.
24. White, *Moral Inquiry*, 21.
25. EOC website, "What Is Discrimination?" https://www.eoc.org.uk/what-is-discrimination.

> should be understood to imply any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference which is based on any ground such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status, *and which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by all persons, on an equal footing, of all rights and freedoms*.[26]

In a sense, discrimination occurs only when differences or diversities are used to deprive some people without regard to merit, thereby disadvantaging such people in the life and activities of given communities.

> Discrimination strikes at the very heart of being human. It is harming someone's rights simply because of who they are or what they believe. Discrimination is harmful and perpetuates inequality. . . . At the heart of all forms of discrimination is prejudice based on concepts of identity, and the need to identify with a certain group. This can lead to division, hatred and even the dehumanization of other people because they have a different identity.[27]

Discrimination manifests itself in various forms, including direct or explicit discrimination where laws and/or policies are put in place to place a greater burden on some groups and not others: for example, a law or policy that disqualifies women of childbearing age, irrespective of their competence and qualification. There is also indirect or implicit discrimination where laws or policies appear neutral because they make a general demand on all but ignore historical deprivations that make such a demand difficult for some and not all. A policy that demands that everyone should own property, be financially stable, or have experience may discriminate indirectly against those who suffer from inherited deprivations. These forms of discrimination are widespread and have disproportionately affected minorities, migrants, people of African descent, women, children, sexual minorities, Dalits, Roma, and Indigenous populations.

It is also important to observe that, while several variables are basis of discrimination in societies, these variables intersect on various points, leading to intensification of discrimination for some people. Take, for example, the case of a young person of African descent who has moved into a new

26. OHCHR and IBA, Human Rights, 651.

27. Amnesty International, "Discrimination," https://www.amnesty.org/en/what-we-do/discrimination.

community in the global North. This young person is affected by several variables: she or he is Black, migrant, inexperienced, poor, and might also be female and Muslim. All these variables will increase this person's vulnerability to discrimination and exploitation.[28] The OSCE recognizes that manifestations of discrimination and intolerance threaten the security of individuals and may give rise to wider-scale conflict and violence that undermine international stability and security.[29] Discrimination undermines the Christian commitment to the "abundant life for all," as previously stated. Below I highlight how discrimination is against the essence of Christian ethical reflections.

Discrimination and Christian Ethics

There are two sides of discrimination that must occupy our conversations: that is, the discrimination *toward* Christians, especially in areas where they are in the minority; and the discrimination *by* Christians, especially where they are in the majority and part of the powerful in that society. However we look at it, ethical principles must address the question of the rightness or wrongness of discrimination, irrespective of the target of that discrimination. I raise this point because of inconsistencies in our ethical reflections depending on who the target of discrimination is. In short, if we feel strongly that discrimination of Christians is wrong, we might want to ask ourselves: Is discrimination or discrimination toward Christians wrong? Alternatively, is discrimination or Christian discrimination of others wrong? Research have shown that

> Most religions and beliefs are imbued with a sense of the oneness of mankind, [even though] history probably records more instances of man's inhumanity to man than examples of good-neighbourliness and the desire to satisfy the needs of the less fortunately placed. Not infrequently, horrors and excesses have been committed in the name of religion or belief. In certain periods of history organized religions have displayed extreme intolerance, restricted, or even denied human liberties, curtailed freedom of thought, and retarded the development of art and culture.[30]

28. Amnesty International, "Discrimination."
29. OSCE and ODIHR, Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians: Focusing on Exclusion, Marginalization and Denial of Rights (Vienna: OSCE and ODIHR, 2009).
30. Krishnaswami, Study of Discrimination.

The quotation above captures the reality of the contribution of religions to discrimination and more throughout human history, especially in those instances when religious traditions entered into relationships with imperial political institutions. The history of colonialism of the 18th through the 20th centuries has sordid stories of Christians complicit in the discrimination and exploitation of people in colonized lands in Africa, the Americas, and Asia. The theological justification of apartheid in South Africa by Christian theologians remains an asterisk in Christian history on the African continent.[31] In a way, it is true that Christian ethical reflections at different times in history have supported discrimination, in which discrimination has been understood, I think erroneously, as symbolizing obedience to scriptures, church tradition, and reason.

> However, it must be stressed that such manifestations of intolerance by organized religions or beliefs were usually the result of traditions, practices and interpretations built up around them; often the followers of a religion or belief considered it to be the sole repository of truth and felt therefore that their duty was to combat other religions or beliefs.[32]

When we revisit the discrimination of women, sexual minorities, and people of African descent, we notice how certain interpretations of scriptures, traditions, and the application of reason were all harnessed with the mistaken assumption of faithfulness to the faith. This is not to deny the fact that there are disturbing texts in the Bible that can easily be read as justifications for discrimination, but it is a recognition of the all-important role of believers—that of interpreting scriptures—which is dependent on many variables, including our prejudices.

It is important to highlight that having a distinct religious identity from others is not in itself discriminatory, but denying some people access to resources and rights because of their distinct religious identity is discriminatory, whether Christians are the targets or the perpetrators. And as we saw in earlier sections, Christian ethical reflections, guided by the principle that all persons are assured of an abundant life by God, have no room for discrimination because discrimination undermines or negates this abundant life for all.

31. Masiiwa Ragies Gunda, "Understanding the Role of the Exodus in the Institutionalization and Dismantling of Apartheid: Considering the Paradox of Justice and Injustice in the Exodus," *Religions* 12:8 (2021), 605. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12080605.
32. Krishnaswami, Study of Discrimination.

Non-Discrimination and Christian Ethics

If discrimination is incompatible with Christian ethical reflections, does that mean non-discrimination is the ethical thing to do from a Christian ethical perspective? While there are possibilities of challenging this position, it would seem that if the quest for "abundant life for all" remains a guiding principle for Christian ethical reflections, then non-discrimination is indeed the ethical position for Christians as they respond to the discrimination of Christians or the discrimination perpetrated by Christians. Scriptural and tradition precedents can be harnessed to sustain this approach to Christian ethics.

> The Bible, in the Book of Leviticus (19:33-4), expressed the ideal of tolerance to strangers in the following words: 'And if a stranger sojourn with thee in thy land, ye shall not do him wrong. The stranger that sojourns with you shall be unto you as the homeborn among you, and thou shalt love him as thyself; for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt; I am the Lord your God'.[33]

The injunction to care for and accommodate the stranger runs through the Old Testament in ways that other injunctions to harm the stranger do not, hence the privileging of this particular injunction. Strangers were then almost always understood as vulnerable, a position that remains true to date, unless they are colonizing strangers. However, it is clear that the Old Testament texts about caring for strangers have in mind weak and vulnerable strangers as opposed to the colonizing stranger. Other texts in prophetic books also make it an obligation for Israelites to protect and defend the vulnerable—widows, orphans, and strangers. In the New Testament, protecting the weak and vulnerable is considered virtuous. This is highlighted especially in Luke 10:25-37, the parable of the good Samaritan. Jesus' question, "Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" helps us appreciate what followers of Jesus were committing themselves to. A life of going out of your way to assure an abundant life for another! In such a scenario, it is impossible to envision discrimination becoming acceptable in such a community.

Besides the biblical resources, there are instances in the history of the church that also teach us to value non-discrimination. Again, there are instances where some leading church personalities might have supported discrimination as a

33. Krishnaswami, Study of Discrimination.

way of preserving the faith, but it is the non-discrimination teachings that are more enduring and remain consistent whether Christians are in the majority or in the minority.

> St. Thomas of Aquinas, a leading exponent of Catholicism, taught as early as the thirteenth century that it was a duty of Governments to uphold freedom of dissident religions before the law and to avoid the scandals and dissensions which suppression of these liberties and guarantees would entail. He also taught that Governments had a duty to avoid compromising the eternal salvation of the dissidents who, thus given their freedom, may be freely converted to the truth.[34]

The ideas of Aquinas come from a period when the church or Christianity had become a dominant religion in Europe, with influence in both public and private life, and at a time when "heresy" was still prominent and fatal. In that context, a Christian counselled governments to respect the rights of all persons and opined that people cannot be forced to adopt the Christian faith; rather, they should be convinced into conversion while enjoying their freedom. Whereas discrimination could have been a much more effective strategy for converting targets, Aquinas understood that such conversions were not sustainable. Hence, he opted against discrimination. From this, it is possible to argue that Aquinas considered non-discrimination the ethical position to adopt and remain faithful to the Christian faith. This position appears to have been further sustained in the writings of the 16th-century Catholic authority Francisco Suarez SJ, nicknamed *Doctor Eximius et Pius* ("Exceptional and Pious Doctor"), who wrote: "The temporal power of the Prince does not extend to the prohibition of the religious rites [of dissidents]; no reason for such prohibitions can be advanced, save their contrariety to the true Faith, and this reason is not sufficient with respect to those who are not subject to the spiritual power of the Church."[35]

This is especially important in a world characterized by religious pluralism; religious diversity is to be accepted, and discrimination based on religious diversity is unacceptable. This argument has the same weight in contexts where Christians are in the majority and have influence across the levers of power and authority, as in those contexts where Christians are powerless minorities. Our responses to discrimination ought to be consistent irrespective of whether Christians are targets or perpetrators.

34. Krishnaswami, Study of Discrimination.

35. Krishnaswami, Study of Discrimination.

In the 17th century, we can draw upon the ideas of John Locke, whose first *Letter concerning Toleration* gives far-reaching teachings on non-discrimination. In this letter, published in 1689, the year after the English revolution, he wrote:

> Thus if solemn assemblies, observations of festivals, public worship be permitted to any one sort of professors, all these things ought to be permitted to the Presbyterians, Independents, Anabaptists, Armenians, Quakers, and others, with the same liberty. Nay, if we may openly speak the truth, and as becomes one man to another, neither pagan nor Mahometan [sic] nor Jew ought to be excluded from the civil rights of the commonwealth because of his religion . . . And the commonwealth which embraces indifferently all men that are honest, peaceable, and industrious, requires it not. Shall we suffer a pagan to deal with trade with us, and shall we not suffer him to pray unto and worship God? If we allow the Jews to have private houses and dwellings amongst us, why should we not allow them to have synagogues? Is their doctrine more false, their worship more abominable, or is the civil peace more endangered by their meeting in public than in their private houses? But if these things may be granted to Jews and pagans, surely the condition of any Christians ought not to be worse than theirs in a Christian commonwealth. . . . If anything passes in a religious meeting seditiously and contrary to the public peace, it is to be punished in the same manner, and not otherwise than as if it had happened in a fair or market. These meetings ought not to be sanctuaries for factious and flagitious fellows. Nor ought it to be less lawful for man to meet in churches than in halls; nor are one part of the subjects to be esteemed more blameable for their meeting together than others.[36]

Toleration or non-discrimination in the understanding of John Locke was meant to be universally applicable on matters of religion explicitly and on all other matters implicitly. He is a man of his time, a time of religious wars and conflicts in the post-Reformation period in Europe, but he writes for his audience back then as if he were writing for contemporary people, when he says: "The toleration of those that differ from others in matters of religion is so agreeable to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and to the genuine reason of

36. Krishnaswami, Study of Discrimination.

mankind, that it seems monstrous for men to be so blind as not to perceive the necessity and advantage of it in so clear a light."[37]

Non-discrimination of all human beings brings greater advantages to society as a whole than the benefits that accrue to some through discrimination. And in another passage of the same letter, he enunciated another idea which has a modern ring to it:

> No man by nature is bound unto any particular church or sect, but everyone joins himself voluntarily to that society in which he believes he has found that profession and worship, which is truly acceptable to God. The hope of salvation, as it was the only cause of his entrance into that communion, so it can be the only reason of his stay there. . . . A church, then, is a society of members voluntarily united to that end.[38]

A Christian ethical reflection that is faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ cannot sustain discrimination: by this is meant the unfair treatment of some people on whatever grounds that result in such persons being denied access to a fulfilling life. Alternatively, a Christian ethical reflection on the relationship of persons concludes that non-discrimination is the only ethical approach to human relations. Non-discrimination entails respecting the rights of all persons, especially the vulnerable and minorities, and it must begin at the local level with implications for the global. Indeed, "the road to ecumenism lies through attention to the locality one knows best. Global issues always have their local manifestations. Local questions generally have their global implications."[39]

While Christians have several sources to consult when reflecting on the ethics around various aspects of life in the community, it is important to acknowledge that these sources do not impose ethical blueprints that we can simply cut and paste into our contexts. The role of these sources is character formation; they provide orientations, narratives, models, types, paradigms, and inspirations—elements permitting us to acquire, on our own initiative, a 'hermeneutic competency' and thus the capacity to judge.[40] The present

37. John Locke, "A Letter Concerning Toleration" (1689).
38. Krishnaswami, Study of Discrimination.
39. Isabel A. Phiri, "The Ecclesiology and Ethics Debate and the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace: An African Perspective," *The Ecumenical Review* 67:4 (December 2015), 621–34.
40. Christopher Rowland and Jonathan Roberts, *The Bible for Sinners: Interpretation in the Present Time* (London: SPCK, 2008), 59–60.

generation cannot abnegate their responsibility to reflect ethically on what affects and threatens the "abundant life for all" today; that task does not fall onto the shoulders of past generations. Rabens explains the task brilliantly:

> Practicing such discernment is a challenge and will remain subjective. Nevertheless, the apostle Paul promises that Christians are not left alone in the task of ethical discernment. Rather, as the body of Christ they 'have the mind of Christ' (1 Cor 2:16; cf. Phlp 2:5). This very fact should provide us with a more optimistic attitude towards our own hearts, inclinations and feelings, as we corporately let our imagination be shaped by Scripture and listen to what the Spirit has been saying to the churches throughout history (cf. church tradition[s] and the embodiment of the Christ-story in the lives of the saints) and is saying today (cf. Rv 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22; Jn 16:12–14).[41]

This brings us to the hermeneutical question that can be decisive in Christian ethical reflection: What would Jesus have done in this situation?

Concluding Observations

Christian ethics and all other ethical traditions out there have a lot in common but also possess some distinctive elements that set them apart. Central to most ethical traditions is the quest to build healthy and sustainable human relations within and among communities. Healthy and sustainable relations are possible only where all persons are given equal opportunities to thrive, with duties and responsibilities being distributed fairly across the society. That some human beings try to subvert healthy relationships to their own advantage cannot be disputed, because history is replete with such persons and groups. For that reason,

> Ethics remains a touchstone of ecumenicity, not in isolation from other concerns, nor as a one-sided lobby, but as Christian personal and community praxis, as a doctrine that is aware of the practice from which it springs and to which it leads, and as action that acknowledges the doctrine that is implicit in it and its responsibility to the ecumenical Christian community in time and space . . .. Ethics makes the ecumenical movement ever aware of the world in which it

41. Volker Rabens, "The Bible and Ethics: Pathways for Dialogue," *In die Skriflig* 51:3 (May 2017), a2246, https://indieskriflig.org.za/index.php/skriflig/article/view/2246/4510.

> operates, both in the sense of the reality from which it emerges and of the influence it exerts and should exert on it.[42]

The belief that all human beings are created in the image of God and that Jesus Christ died on the cross to reconcile all human beings to God suggests that discrimination is incompatible with these central Christian beliefs. Therefore, non-discrimination is to be taken as praxis emerging out of the Christian faith. As new situations emerge, the ecumenical moral community must pay attention to new situations from the lens of "Does this action promote or inhibit abundant life for all?"[43]

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42. Bonino, *Ethics*, 406–12.

43. Phiri, "Ecclesiology and Ethics Debate."