

生命倫理學：跨文化研究

Bioethics: Cross-Cultural Explorations

譚傑志

Joseph Tham

摘要 Abstract

本文在探討解決生命倫理學領域經常出現的高度複雜問題時，當地文化和宗教傳統的涉入是必要的，也是應該具有一定地位的，但這一點在許多相關的學術文獻中卻經常被忽視，甚至被質疑。本文首先考察宗教生命倫理學的歷史根源和該學科的世俗化，然後敘述聯合國教科文組織生命倫理學和人權教席的“生命倫理學、多元文化與宗教”國際項目的經驗。在過去12年裡，該項目將基督教、佛教、儒教、道教、猶太教、印度教、穆斯林教及世俗倫理學的學者聚集在一起，進行了8次會議，討論生命倫理學課題。本文首先描述這些會議所涉及的不

譚傑志，羅馬宗座宗徒之后大學生命倫理學系教授，意大利。
Joseph Tham, Professor of Bioethics, Regina Apostolorum University, Italy.

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同取向、目標和方法論的演變。方法論的演變是為了尋求項目可能的趨同點或共同點。然後，本文討論這些年出現的最突出的問題。它們是：i) 普遍主義與多元主義問題，即體現在全球生命倫理學與地方倫理學之間的問題；ii) 東西方在人權與義務概念上的分歧；iii) 跨文化和跨宗教對話的目標應該被框定為趨同、共識還是對談；以及 iv) 在不同傳統面對現代性時所持續存在的科學與信仰之間的問題。

This paper explores the need for and place of input from local cultures and religious traditions when addressing the highly complex questions that frequently arise in the field of bioethics, something which is often overlooked and even questioned in much of the relevant academic literature. It begins by examining the historical roots of religious bioethics and the secularization of the discipline before then recounting the experience of the Bioethics, Multiculturalism and Religion Project of the UNESCO Chair in Bioethics and Human Rights. Over the past 12 years, this Project has brought together Christians, Buddhists, Confucians, Daoists, Jews, Hindus, Muslims, and secular ethicists in eight encounters to discuss bioethical topics. First, the paper describes the different orientations, goals and methodological changes involved in these encounters. The methodology of meeting evolving is a search for possible convergence or common ground in the Project. The paper then addresses the most salient questions that have emerged these years. They are i) the problem of universalism vs. pluralism, which is witnessed in global bioethics vs. local diversity; ii) the East-West divide on the conception of human rights vs. duties; iii) cross-cultural and interreligious dialogue goals are framed as convergence, consensus or conversation; and iv) the ongoing issue of science and faith as different traditions confront modernity.

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I. Introduction

I am honored to write the principal paper for this journal issue on cross-cultural dialogue in bioethics. My interest grew from my doctoral research on the history of the religious contribution to bioethics and its subsequent secularization. My study of the theme showed that while the early pioneers of bioethics in the 1970s were faith-based, the discipline eventually transformed into an a-religious, irreligious, and even anti-religious one in the next 30 years. My claim was that this turn had impoverished the field of bioethics and bioethical discussions. And while my dissertation focused primarily on the West, especially in the Anglo-Saxon world, and critiqued it from a Christian theological and philosophical perspective, (J. Tham 2008; S. J. Tham 2008) I was soon asked to spearhead a project of the UNESCO Chair in Bioethics and Human Rights entitled “Bioethics, Multiculturalism and Religion,” which has now been running for more than a decade. This new direction was not an entirely foreseen one and has introduced me into a brand-new circle of world religions and cultures.

My paper will draw primarily from these personal engagements, which have affected my thinking on the place of religions, cultures, and traditions in bioethics. I will first summarize the issue of secularization and religion’s role in bioethics. Then, I will recount the past 12 years of the UNESCO Project—the origins, the experiences, the search for methodology, the challenges and difficulties with dialogue, and the outstanding issues we have encountered.

I am sure that many other initiatives of intercultural and religious dialogue in bioethics and beyond exist in the world today. The effort I will describe is only a modest exploration, with much room for improvements and constructive exchanges with commentators of this paper, which I look forward to receiving.¹

II. Secularization and the Role of Religion in Bioethics

In today’s secular societies, religion has become a dirty word that signifies intolerance and backwardness. Bioethics is not exempt from this unfortunate prejudice. A few years back, the *American Journal of Bioethics* issued a monograph on the place of religion in bioethics. Murphy’s leading article, “In defense of irreligious bioethics,”

(1) While I am aware that religions, traditions, religious traditions, cultural traditions, culture have nuances and connotations and are different for different scholars and groups, for all practical purposes, they are used interchangeably in this article.

reiterates the common complaint that religion is irrational, unprovable, and ultimately divisive in a liberal society. (Murphy 2012)

This phenomenon is in great contrast with the founding of the discipline, especially in the 1960s in the USA. At that time, most pioneers were clerics or came from strong religious backgrounds. However, due to several factors precipitating the secularization of society in different ambits, academic bioethics quickly moved away from theology and theological languages to legal and philosophical ones. Numerous authors have described this, and the causes are many. (Engelhardt 1991; Taylor 2018)

In my dissertation, after tracing the history and development of bioethics in the West, I noticed how religious input suffered a decline due to the secularization of society in the realms of culture, law, philosophy, healthcare, and education. Religious-inspired educational institutions turned secular, as well as many of their elites.

Daniel Callahan, a founder of the Hastings Center, lamented in the 1990s that the “marginalization of religion in bioethics effectively downgraded one potential source of vigor to explore larger questions (cultural questions of bioethics) goals of medicine, change, health, [and the] living of a life.” (Callahan 1999, 68) He believed that due to this marginalization, bioethical debates became thinner and essential questions on the goals of medicine received scarce attention. Secular approaches, in fact, tend to focus on the practical rights, justice and safety issues. They do not have the tools to analyze the deeper interrogatories of health, disease and death.

Is the current secular approach to bioethics inadequate? Can religious traditions contribute to the discussion, and if so, in what ways? There is a plurality of religions with a surprising amount of diversity even within each of these religious groups or traditions. How can we be sure that these positions are representative? What happens if there are contradictions and opposing opinions? Can religion and theology be scientific and objective enough? How much can religion say about the latest advances in AI, gene editing, and neuroscience?

Indeed, religious ethics is not a panacea to bioethical dilemmas. I think religious bioethics can be corrective and supplemental to secular models. As I have written in the past, the dialogue can enrich in terms of content, communities and methodology. Regarding content, religion can provide the historical link shared by many cultures, providing symbols and narratives that local people can understand since many of their worldviews are shaped through these stories. Religion can also provide insight into the ends or telos of human existence, and thus into those elements that give meaning to human life, by attempting to answer questions on the nature of happiness, suffering and death, health, and the ends of medicine. Religious communities can offer

bioethics as a model of unity in diversity and a model of alliance in health care. They can take a prophetic testimony of righteousness, emphasize the importance of virtues and holiness in providers, and give evidence of self-care and self-sacrifice in medicine. Regarding methodology, how these religious wisdom or insights are applied or translated into local policies are culture-dependent. (Campbell 1990; Davis and Zoloth 1999; Evans 2012; Gustafson 1996; Hauerwas 1986; Lammers and Verhey 1998; Meilaender 1996; Tham 2011b; Thomasma 1996)

At the end of this paper, we will look at how religious insights on the human person can contribute to bioethical discussions and discourse.

III. UNESCO Chair' s involvement with Multiculturalism and Religion

The founding of the UNESCO Chair in Bioethics and Human Rights in 2009 within the *Università Europea di Roma* and the *Ateneo Pontificio Regina Apostolorum*, where I teach, propelled me to oversee the Project involving Bioethics, Multiculturalism and Religion. The UNESCO chairs are conceptually independent research institutes that UNESCO supervises to promote universal values among its member states in education, science, culture and communication. The history of the UNESCO Chair has been recounted elsewhere (García Gómez 2021). For me, it was a venture into the new world of religious and intercultural dialogue, focusing on human rights and through the lens of global bioethics. It is an area that is academically novel but methodologically uncertain. The slogan of the Chair, “Fostering the art of convergence in global bioethics,” is intentionally vague. Words such as religion, culture, global, and convergence (let alone bioethics) are notoriously difficult to define.

The first event occurred in Jerusalem in 2009, latching on to another bioethics congress concurrently to make it logistically and financially feasible. It was our first attempt to engage the world of religions which in the Holy Land means engaging with Judaism, Islam and Christianity. We thought the commonality among these Abrahamic monotheistic faiths might offer more areas of agreement. This one-day event, “Culture of Life and Religion,” was held in the traditional format with lecturers from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Al-Quds University and the Pontifical Academy of Life. (UNESCO Chair in Bioethics and Human Rights Dec 14. 2009a) The speakers were chosen from various local and international contacts who explained their viewpoints in their presentations. The talks were followed by questions and answers from other participants in the audience. A summary of areas of a common accord was drafted,

affirming the sacredness of human life deserving respect and dignity, but without entering into individual differences about personhood and thorny issues of abortion and euthanasia. (UNESCO Chair in Bioethics and Human Rights 2009b) There were many unforeseen hurdles to overcome: political sensitivities about the status of Jerusalem², the provision of kosher and halal meals, the location of the conference, the use of logos and images (causing retraction and redesigning of the posters), and simultaneous interpretations into Arabic, English, Hebrew and Italian.

This first attempt at interreligious dialogue made us realize the complexity of discussion among cultural divides. As we planned for the second encounter, we mulled over which traditions to include. We were afraid that if dialogue among three kindred religions was already demanding, would adding other creeds create more discord? In the end, we decided to include Eastern voices in the following encounter by involving Buddhism, Confucianism, and Hinduism. Undoubtedly, many bioethics scholars with religious backgrounds are versed in their traditions. There are also experts in religious studies. We could send out feeders or look up names through educational institutions or the network of academicians. From our first encounter, we realized that personal friendship could overcome potential ugly confrontations. Hence, we opted to invite scholars with whom we were personally acquainted. It was unwittingly a winning formula because it created a pleasant atmosphere of intellectual exchange for the next decade.

During this second phase of the Project, we also realized that seeking consensus or convergence among the religions was a rather ambitious, and perhaps even unrealistic goal. A more modest one was to promote understanding through the interaction of different specialists. Consequently, the subsequent encounters were dedicated to listening and grasping the resemblances and variations of the traditions. There was a lingering discomfort with the idea that religious plurality might lead to a type of ethical relativism. One way to overcome this anxiety was to orient the conversations toward the principles listed in the UNESCO Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights (UDBHR). (UNESCO 2005) Since numerous member states have adopted and acclaimed this short document, the principles should be general and “universal” enough to be non-controversial. Besides, this UNESCO

(2) We had a poster that location of the conference as “Jerusalem, Israel” which the Palestinian speakers objected. They only agree if for their affiliation, they would be coming from “Jerusalem, Palestine” which could be controversial. After deliberations, we decided to remove the country from the program, which some Jewish speakers object as all other cities come with a country. In the end, we eliminated the country of origin from the program, mentioning only the cities.

Chair of Bioethics and Human Rights had in its mission to promote a Declaration bearing its namesake.

The format underwent several changes to foster mutual understanding and dialogue. The customary conference structure where different traditions expound their positions was not engaging enough. At the same time, we wanted a method that could generate tangible academic output. Therefore, we decided against drafting a consensus statement as the differences between the religious traditions are enormous, and any achievable common ground would be too thin and generic to actually be of any consequence. In the end, the Project was designed around commissioning papers that would be shared and read by the other speakers before the encounter. During the meeting, there would be ample time for presentation, discussion and feedback. The papers would then be refined and published in journals or books. These meetings, which we call Workshops, are not geared towards a large audience but only those academically passionate about the subject. Typically, we also offer a less technical session open to the public to raise awareness about the theme.

The topics chosen for the next decade were taken from the different articles of the UDBHR, except the case of “neurogenomics” at MD Anderson, Houston (2016), which preferred a more biomedical topic. Therefore, the Workshops respectively explored human vulnerability (art. 8) in Rome (2011), human rights and cultural diversity (art. 12) in Hong Kong (2013), social responsibility in health (art. 14) in Mexico City (2014), informed consent (art. 6-7) in Rome (2018), future generation and human reproduction (art. 16) in Casablanca (2019), and ecology (art. 17) in Bangkok (2022). Apart from the first Workshop, the six religious traditions represented were Buddhism, Confucianism, Hinduism, Christianity, Islam and Judaism. Hong Kong and Bangkok were the only Workshops to contain Daoism since very few academics are versed in its position on bioethics. We added speakers from non-religious perspectives for greater exchange in the last two meetings.

Year	2009	2011	2013	2014	2016	2018	2019	2022
Date	12.13	10.9-11	12.3-5	11.10-13	11.14-16	02.21-23	11.11-13	11.20-22
Topic	Culture of Life and Religion	Human Vulnerability (Art. 8 UDBHR)	Human Rights in Bioethics (Art. 12 UDBHR)	Social Responsibility in Health (Art. 14 UDBHR)	Neurogenomics	Informed Consent (Art. 6-7 UDBHR)	Human Reproduction (Art. 16 UDBHR)	Protection of the Environment (Art. 17 UDBHR)
Location	Jerusalem	Rome	Hong Kong	Mexico City	Houston	Rome	Casablanca	Bangkok
No. traditions	3	6	7	6	6	6	7	8
No. speakers	6	23	25	25	24	12	30	28
External Participants	50	20	35	30	30	35	20	15
No. participants Public session	N/A	40	80	25	20	50	--	25
Publications	Conclusion	Religious Perspectives on Human Vulnerability in Bioethics (Tham, Garcia, and Miranda 2014)	Religious Perspectives on Bioethics and Human Rights (Tham, Kwan, and Garcia 2017)	Religious Perspectives on Social Responsibility in Health (Tham, Durante, and Garcia, 2018)	Interreligious Perspectives on Mind, Genes and the Self (Tham, Durante, and Gómez 2018)	Cross-Cultural and Religious Critiques of Informed Consent (Tham, García Gómez, and Garasic 2021)	Multicultural and Interreligious Perspectives on the Ethics of Human Reproduction (Tham, Garcia Gómez, and Lunstroth 2021)	

While picking the topics from the articles of UDBHR eliminated some uncertainties, the insertion of human rights into intercultural and religious dialogue had an unintended complication because many traditions do not accept the human rights paradigm, and we thus further adapted the methodology to facilitate discussions. The 2011 Rome workshop asked the respective creeds to only critique their views on the UDBHR article and the associated International Bioethics Committee (IBC) report on the principle of vulnerability. Other speakers gave feedback during the encounters, but deeper interactions were still missing.

In subsequent Workshops, each tradition consisted of a leading paper with two responses, one from within the same tradition and one from a distinct tradition. This method aimed to generate richer comprehension of each faith and bring out nuances that were not immediately evident. Detailed instructions and guidelines for writing the papers and Workshop participants were given and re-elaborated with each subsequent Workshop. For instance, when some pieces were too personal and unfocused, the guidelines suggested quoting authoritative or sacred sources in their papers to establish the representativity of the tradition. In addition, the guidelines gave recommendations to mention or comment on relevant UN human rights sources. Some leading questions were provided as guidance in drafting the papers to encourage greater adherence to the Workshop topic. All the presenters were asked to read every single article, so they came to the discussion prepared. However, it soon became evident that most presenters did not have the time to read 25 papers of their colleagues before the meeting. Hence, most learning and discussion took place on-site during the Workshops.

From 2015-2017, as I was named dean to the School of Bioethics at our university, I took a more passive role to the Project. Chris Durante became the academic coordinator during this period and conceived of the new role of the Facilitator to improve the quality of meetings. His expertise in comparative religion and his proposal of dialogue among diversities was well received among the participants. This brand-new figure of the Facilitator was tasked with reading the principal and two response papers before the Workshop and formulating areas of similarities, “bridge concepts,” possible disagreements and controversies. As we will see later, this role was a response to better understand convergence, consensus and conversation in the Project. (Durante 2015) After the three papers were presented at the Workshop, the Facilitator would help tease out the issues and encourage thicker conversation among the paper presenters and the audience. In the words of the instruction prepared for this purpose:

The purpose of the Facilitator is to assist in: furthering mutual understanding amongst the interlocutors; establishing points of agreement amongst the panelists; and, attempting to resolve disagreements that may arise.

While the idea of Facilitators was excellent, the results were less than satisfactory. Some sessions dragged on, and the Facilitator sometimes gave another presentation that cut short the discussion time. In hindsight, we realized that not all the Facilitators had sufficient training in the respective traditions to perform the task.

In the past seven Workshops, the speakers had come from many different walks of life, countries and professions. Naturally, many are academics, ethicists, and with medical backgrounds. They are also different levels of commitment to the religious traditions they represent—from committed clerics and lukewarm practitioners to those with purely academic interests and noncommittal atheists. While religion could be taboo in many circles, the core group of participants has learned to be cordial and courteous, even when debating thorny issues. There is much conviviality among the group, as one of them accounted:

The formal Workshop/conference I just described is embedded in various other events and activities, and that is where discussions continue, and friendships are formed and cemented. Many people arrive beforehand to attend planned outings. In Mexico City, we went to the pyramids, Teotihuacán, and the anthropological museum in Chapultepec. In Rome, we had an audience with the Pope at the Vatican and visited the main Synagogue at the ghetto. In Hong Kong, we visited a Buddhist temple complex and had 7-day tour of central China for those who wanted to go... In Morocco, the venue was at the Hassan II mosque in Casablanca with an excursion to Marrakesh. Casablanca was also magical but in a different way... Enjoying the local cuisine is also a part of the experience. In Rome, we had various local dishes, including one at a kosher restaurant in the Jewish ghetto. In Hong Kong, we had lunch one day in a very fancy restaurant, 100 stories above the harbor... In Morocco some of us dined at the Rick's Cafe made famous in the 1942 movie, Casablanca... In the evenings, one or more groups will meet for dinner or drinks, usually at the hotel or sometimes at a restaurant... In all these contexts, there is considerable opportunity to question and learn from each other and form the kinds of friendships and memories that lead to the desire to learn more. (Lunstroth 2021, ix)

Last but not least, these Workshops have successfully generated publications in prestigious editorials throughout the years, manifesting the quality of the engagement and the seriousness of the endeavors. (Tham, Durante, and Garcia 2018; Tham, Durante, and Gómez 2018; Tham et al. 2014, 2017; Tham, Garcia Gómez, and Lunstroth, 2021; Tham, Gómez, and Garasic, 2021)

After years of gathering, we needed to define our goals and nature better. A select group of core members stayed after the 2019 Workshop to discuss the status and future of the Project. We analyzed the successes and difficulties over the past decade. We ironed out some wrinkles and reformulated a more consistent “Mission statement” to reflect the nature of our undertaking:

The mission of the Bioethics, Multiculturalism & Religion Project is to provide a forum in which representatives of diverse religions and traditions can:

- engage one another in a sustained scholarly dialogue about global bioethics;
- cultivate an amicable atmosphere so participants can learn about each other’s tradition or religion with discursive empathy;
- promote mutual understanding of global bioethics through respectful discussion and scholarship;
- strive to develop the linguistic and conceptual space in which common ground or convergence can emerge and be mutually recognized and appreciated; and finally
- foster creative cooperation while respecting the dignity and uniqueness of each tradition.

In addition, we discussed the need to reconfigure the methodology of papers and responses. The main difficulty we saw was that with the three papers format, the response paper from the same tradition typically is not sufficiently critical. Conversely, the other tradition’s response routinely states why their own tradition’s rationale would be distinct and restates them. In the subsequent encounters, to correct these trends, it was decided that each tradition would write the leading paper(s), and scholars from another background would write a response paper. These were the instructions for the improved methodology that was applied in Bangkok:

The main paper’s general idea is that the scholar in a tradition will explain and demonstrate how their tradition would approach the bioethical issues. It is understood that the scholar will have a

position on what their tradition says that is not necessarily universally shared by other experts. Therefore, we do not expect the author to summarize all the arguments supporting their position in this short paper. That being said, the author must assume the responding author may know little about the main paper's native tradition and that the piece will be a learning moment for the respondent.

The responding scholar should approach the main paper as though they are visiting a sacred site with curiosity and respect. They are not expected to do more than try to understand what they see and respond from their position. It may involve asking questions; thus, the two authors are expected to engage in dialogue as the respondent digests and understand what the primary author means. The main paper must be willing to explain basic or advanced things about their tradition to the respondent, and vice versa. Although the central metaphor is an outsider visiting and learning about another tradition, the host will want to know about the visitor's perspectives and reasons in all good conversations. Some respondents will have a significant understanding of the leading expert's tradition. In those situations, the authors should still engage each other at their respective levels and write accordingly.

These different encounters show that intercultural and religious dialogue in bioethics is complex, nuanced, and still in its infancy. Our meager endeavor is just one of many attempts to devise substantive interactions that can pave the way for future efforts.

IV. Ongoing issues

Over the past decade of papers presented and discussed at the Workshops, many issues have been explored. The publications resulting from these encounters testify to the development of these deliberations. Here, we will not address topics that are particular to each Workshop. Instead, we will focus on recurrent and overarching concerns in the Project. First, we will look at the problem of one and many as it relates to the philosophy and theology of religions, expressing its universality and diversity. It is related to the methodological issue but ultimately touches on the nature and aim of intercultural dialogue. A third ongoing issue regards the intersection of science and faith in bioethics. As religions confront scientism and modernity, identity and legitimate self-modification problems emerge.

(1) One vs. Many

Our revisions of Workshop methodology and the mission statement reflect the group's continuous refinement of the tension between universality and diversity. The very names of global bioethics and human rights already presuppose the existence of universal truths in ethical behavior. However, the variety of religious and cultural positions implies that there can also be a plurality of approaches and justifications, in addition to a diversity of ethical deductions within this universality. This tension is acknowledged in the UDBHR's article 12 on universal human rights and cultural diversity. Early in the Project, authors of different religious traditions were perplexed by the assumption that human rights are accepted without question and thus universal in their scope. In the Hong Kong Workshop, when we confronted this issue we noted that:

While most United Nations documents and declarations are explicitly non-religious, they claim universality because of a political consensus. However, ...the claim to universality of human rights and cultural diversity cannot be easily made. A purely secular approach is unable to give an adequate answer to the problem, and in fact seems a bit schizophrenic when it tries to appease pluralism and universalism simultaneously. On the one hand, having turned its back on religion, postmodern culture finds it difficult to accept a universal ethic which smells too much like totalitarianism and authoritarian religious ideology. The fragmented moral tradition prefers the language of diversity and tolerance. On the other hand, there is a need to affirm human rights which can only make sense if it is universal in its scope. (Tham 2017, 290)

The problem of one vs. many is as old as philosophy itself but has become very contentious in postmodern debates. Hence, it is understandable that our Project ran into this dispute early on. In philosophical and metaethics literature, on one extreme are those who espouse relativism of varying degrees. They either deny the existence of objective truth in the Nietzschean sense, stating that all points of view are equally valid (Rorty 1989), or are epistemologically skeptical that moral certainties can be ascertained by reason. (Engelhardt 2006) At the other extreme are those who are fairly optimistic about achieving universal agreement, either through human rights and global ethical discourse (Have and Gordijn 2013), consensus through public reason of Rawlsian or Habermasian varieties (Habermas 1991; Rawls 2005) or natural law theorists affirming universal ethics. (International Theological Commission 2012) Due to space, I will not repeat this

theoretical question I have amply deliberated in the past (Tham 2017). Suffice it to say that any projects exploring cross-cultural dialogue will eventually need to confront this issue conceptually and methodologically. (MacIntyre 1989; Ratzinger and Habermas 2007)

(2) Human rights vs. duties

The subsequent inquiry regards the universality of human rights in the face of diverse cultures. We note that a naïve supposition of universal human rights could not be taken for granted. Instead, the rights discourse is a recent invention after the tragedy of the world wars. While human rights doctrine is primarily a western notion, its Judeo-Christian root is *imago dei*, human beings created in the image of God. This foundation, too, is shared by Islam. Modern-day human rights discourse, however, is devoid of religious bearings and thus lacks a foundational theory other than the *via negativa* of abuses when such rights are neglected or trampled on. The lack of a secular basis for human rights eventually leads to ambiguities and proliferation of rights in liberal democracies, thereby weakening them and receiving backlash from religious communities.

In contrast, a faith-based interpretation of the rights discourse is substantive, be it from human nature based on metaphysics, natural law, or human dignity from which rights arise. Islamic authors are dubious about “human” rights that could diminish “God’s” supreme rights over us. Eastern traditions are also quite uncomfortable with the rights language and prefer to talk about our duties and responsibilities towards others. Rights are commonly understood as protection from being infringed upon or deprived of some basic needs. They are better reformulated as the duty towards disadvantaged and vulnerable people. Hinduism, Buddhism and Daoism are generally indifferent to personal rights and gains, as the highest ideal is spiritual illumination. Confucianism and Hinduism may have problems with the rights language because their traditions allow for unequal treatment of strangers. (Tham 2017, 279–82)

Our 2014 Workshop on social responsibility illustrates the difference in emphasis mentioned above. I observe that a secularized understanding of this concept as supererogation is overrated. While Christian charity devotes a great deal to charity as going beyond one’s duty, its secular counterpart of “supererogation” proposes that everyone receives benefit without preferential treatment in a just society. It becomes a romanticized universal right of flawless humanity that rises above egocentric and selfish inclinations. It might be unrealistically optimistic to imagine humankind as capable of sacrificing individual or collective comforts to provide for the less fortunate. I wrote that,

The fact that religious traditions prefer the language of duties rather than rights is a humble recognition of the debility of the human condition. Egalitarian rights and munificent social responsibility might exist in the ideal world, product of the Enlightenment. While there is a definite correlation between responsibility and rights, religious traditions challenge the fact that duties are derived from rights: Buddhism, with its difficulty with foundation; Hinduism, with its caste categories ingrained in *dharma*; Confucianism, with the priority of family and non-egalitarianism; Islam, with its primary duty to God; and Christianity, with its critique of highest attainable health as an absolute good. (Tham 2018a, 9)

Another issue that arose during these exchanges on human rights is colonialism, which in recent years has become contentious. Colonialism is sometimes mentioned in the same breath as western scientific and technological advances being exported to the rest of the globe. But mostly, it is a problem of cultural dominance over many local traditions, so indigenous cultural thoughts and practices have been corrupted, decimated, or replaced. Lunstroth claims that the original purity of a tradition can no longer be recognized or recoverable. The human rights discourse, global ethics, and even the word “religion” are examples of colonization of the rest of the globe. Islam, Confucianism, and Indian cultures are the primary victims of such imperialism from the West, with Christian conquerors the main culprit. Nonetheless, it might be too simplistic to conflate the colonizing influence of Western powers in the past 500 years with Christianity when it, too, suffered from the process of the Enlightenment and secularization. (Advani 2022; Lunstroth 2022)

(3) Convergence, consensus or conversation

Our evolving Workshop methodologies reflect the tension between a universal ethic amid religio-cultural diversity. As a priest trained in the Catholic system, I am deeply sympathetic to natural law reasoning that abhors the moral nihilism and relativism that Foucault, Derrida and Rorty propose. However, even though I agree with Engelhardt’s position of contentless convention in secular reality, I find his epistemological skepticism of the place of reason in moral deliberation unacceptable. Are we moral strangers unable to converse civilly and substantively about our differences? Would any substantial agreement be of the Rawlsian type, the product of a tolerable consensus through public reason? Is objective moral truth be reachable through human reason and judgment, albeit damaged by sin? In a recent publication, we defended this latter possibility in contrast with

the Rawlsian-Kantian and Confucian proposals. (Farrell and Tham 2022c, 2022b, 2022a)

At the same time, I have also acknowledged the difficulties faced by natural reasoning in current bioethical debates. The challenges are many and varied, among them: Humean naturalistic fallacy where nature cannot confer ethical values; human nature no longer conceived as something fixed but evolving, making the language of nature incomprehensible, especially for those with a scientific mindset; and the historicity of natural law in its concrete applications. (Tham 2011a, 2013b, 2014b)

I commend Alasdair MacIntyre's traditions-constituted conversation as the most fitting theory for our Project. According to his *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* he concurs with the postmodern critiques that there cannot be any independent observer beyond a particular tradition speaking to all parties but can only inquire from within a specific moral tradition to which one belongs. (MacIntyre 1989) The technical term for this is the incommensurability of ethical traditions. At the surface, cultural or religious practices may appear to have similar virtues and values. However, deeper analysis shows incommensurable differences in their reasoning or justifications commonly glossed over. This incommensurability does not necessarily lead to relativism nor "preclude rational debate and encounter." (MacIntyre 1991, 118) Incommensurability is not merely a problem of translation. For traditions-constituted conversations to succeed, interlocutors entering the dialogue must be fully immersed in their traditions and correctly represent them with a detailed account of their progress and history, theory and applications, triumphs, challenges and failures. Rational confrontations with competing civilizations occur when the consistency of practices and attitudes are assessed and examined, with resultant modification, assimilation and refinement. The second phase occurs when inquirers of one moral tradition relate a rival tradition's history from the rival's perspective, "employing the standards of rational success or failure internal to that other's point of view." (MacIntyre 1991, 119) For this to happen, a tradition must be ready to expose itself with intellectual honesty and utmost vulnerability without hiding its deficiencies. The rival tradition must also accept the absence of an impartial and unbiased position that can judge between them. Such honest exchanges would allow rival traditions to acknowledge their strong and weak points, rationally accept their own inconsistencies and the superior logic of their rival, and conceivably forego their tradition in whole or in part.

In effect, MacIntyre's framework does not eschew the possibility of the emergence of a superior moral tradition through rational dialogue and encounters. *Pace* Engelhardt, moral strangers can talk to

each other rationally and convince others to change without force or conversion. However, it seems to be a drawn-out process and will require much dedication and openness from rival traditions. Nevertheless, it confirms our project intuition that respectful and honest conversations can lead to some form of convergence or common ground. MacIntyre does not provide a pragmatic pathway as to how we could translate his theory into practice.

Meanwhile, Chris Durante, one of our core members involved in comparative religious studies, offered a method of dialogue apt for our purpose in three phases. The first phase is “consensus building,” where each tradition presents its viewpoint and rationale without recriminations. Other interlocutors could enter the discussion to clarify ideas and enrich the dialogue. It is a continual process with a constant search for shareable or “bridge” concepts. With this, we can avoid relativism since truth is not the same as justification—we can grasp the logic of these justifications without subscribing to their veracity. The second phase consists of the mutual acceptance of interpretive diversity when there is sufficient unanimity for a specific claim to be considered universal. At the same time, universality does not imply total uniformity but allows for “indigenous pluralism.” The third stage is to accept disagreement when the various positions are incommensurable. In this case, tolerance between the interlocutors is ultimately required. However, tolerance is not a principle but is established as a permissibility parameter and does not imply support or endorsement. (Durante 2015). As mentioned, the Facilitator’s introduction in the Workshop was part of the attempt to incorporate these aspects of Durante’s overarching method. Unfortunately, the role did not turn out as planned because we could not find Facilitators among the group that has the time and desire to engage in the high level of work, which would also require participants to produce multi-tiered consensus positions.

Despite these setbacks, the Project has borne some degree of success. The conclusions of the last five publications from the Workshops have employed these notions of convergence or bridge concepts. In particular, bridge concepts are explicitly used in the Workshop’s conclusion on human rights and cultural diversity (Hong Kong 2013). While this debate between universality and diversity has been contentious, the long paragraph below summarizes this finding:

In order to move forward, certain bridge concepts may further advance this dialogue between human rights and cultural diversity. Coming from the thin approach of human rights, we can examine the nature and types of dialogue itself, with proposals about convergence, compromise, and dialectics. From the other end, the

thick approach offers reflections on human nature, natural law, humaneness, and relationality. Roughly speaking, they correspond to the traditional division of ethical methodology into teleology and deontology, with their respective strengths and deficiencies. The thin and teleological approaches of human rights seek consensus in a changing world by adapting to the local situations and contexts and then projecting these globally. Thick deontological approaches prefer to start with the metaphysics of the human person and derive ethical principles, duties and rights from it. The weakness of the former is that a consensus language of rights does not seem to give ethics a firm base and is open to whims of cultural change. On the other hand, the latter methodology is considered top-heavy and inflexible in adapting to the changing contextual and cultural needs of the times. But if we study these two approaches more carefully a rapprochement can be found. (Tham 2017, 286)

To foster cross-cultural dialogue, the kind of openness requires a certain mindset or attitude. For some, it might mean leaving religious security comfort zones and entering an unknown ambit. For others less tied to a tradition, it could be a space for exploring new ideas and orientations. Sometimes conversations can be heated as they can challenge your long-held convictions. MacIntyre's model speaks of honesty, openness, and willingness to recognize the deficiency of one's tradition. Durante proposes cosmopolitanism as the rules of engagement, with friendship or conviviality as the disposition *sine qua non*. The abstract of his chapter neatly summarizes the approach:

In the spirit of conviviality, the purpose is to cultivate an amicable atmosphere of intellectual encounters by encouraging the pursuit of moral ideals that traverse faith and culture while simultaneously fostering a cosmopolitan ethos capable of respecting the ethical uniqueness of each religio-cultural tradition. Through participation in a continuous series of ethical conversations, the aim is for those involved to pursue interfaith and intercultural consensus without losing sight of the fact that commensurability is possible in a pluralistic society even when the prospects for a unanimous agreement seem bleak. As such, we recognize that commonality does not imply uniformity, and strive to promote mutual understanding and creative cooperation in our efforts to build bridges and forge the foundations of an ethical paradigm with global appeal. (Durante 2018)

(4) Science, faith and reason

One last thing we need to analyze is the value and contribution of different religious inputs to bioethical topics. People might still find this contribution nebulous, as theological approaches may not seem empirical enough. Besides, people may wonder who has the authority to define our religions or traditions and speak authoritatively about them. Is it the clerics, the monks, the mystic, the rabbi, the patriarch or the theologian? Which are the authoritative sacred texts, and there could also be a diversity of opinions on a particular topic within the same sect or denomination.

Granted, with the wealth of cultures and traditions and a plethora of opinions, religions may not offer straightforward guidelines for bioethical policies. All we can offer is that religion can thicken the thin soup of contemporary ethics with added ingredients of telos, meaning, *dharma*, relationships, spiritual resilience and transcendence. While their methods are not homogeneous, regardless of variations and debates within each group, they are complex rules and boundaries analogous to “scientific” deliberations. The religious methodology is like ingredients in cooking, there is specific liberty to mix them up, but there are also culinary rules to follow. Otherwise, we can spoil the broth. The published volumes in the series of Workshop witness this lively diversity and a core unity particular to each culture. In our Workshop in Casablanca (2019), this seasoning of religious ethics came to the fore:

Monotheistic religions are considered more legalistic in their approach to ethics—Jewish sources include the Torah, Talmud and Halakha; Islamic sources include the Quran, Shari’a, and Fiqh; and Christian sources may variably include the Bible, Patristics and Magisterial interpretations. Eastern traditions are more flexible as they do not have canonical textual sources, and their interpretations are apparently open-ended.

Many papers discussed the levels of authority and relevance of religious sources, and the elasticity of hermeneutic boundaries... Religious writings and practices are varied sources of ethical insights and deliberations. They could be historical narratives or fantastic mythologies, authoritative commandments or wisdom literature. They can offer proscriptive norms or encourage virtuous living. Some are meant to be taken at face value, and others are spiritual insights or testimonies to inspire better living. Hence, we find that in ethical analyses, there are recurrent debates between deontology vs. teleology, strict vs. lax interpretations, universality vs. locality, fundamentalism vs. relativism, truth vs. compassion, following God’s will out of duty vs. out of love...

They all depict a perennial tension between ethics of high ideals of holiness and the recognition of broken humanity that continually falls short of that ideal. (Tham 2021, 273–74)

Lastly, one final objection from the camp of irreligious bioethics would need further rejoinder. For them, since religious traditions are conservative and throwbacks, they cannot readily address the progress of science and the demands of the modern era. I have already mentioned that the system of religious ethics is not random and irrational. Perhaps it is not a dry-cut system like analytical philosophy dominant in the Anglo-Saxon school, but they could be consistent in their logic and approach. (Tham 2013a) At the same time, there is also a plurality of philosophies and methods in secular bioethics, which are likewise divisive. Undoubtedly, many cultural traditions may not have been able to address the rapid advances of scientific innovations. However, innovations in science do not mean a constant invention of ethics. (Tham 2012)

Our publications illustrate how spiritual ingredients can flavor the blandness of secular approaches. In their reflection on human vulnerability, alternative imaginations may let us see that disability is not a curse but a blessing, and vulnerability is a part of the human condition that calls us to renounce hubris and embrace our woundedness. (Tham 2014a) Regarding emerging technologies such as neurogenomics, faith-based reflections center on the question of selfhood and identity. They ask: how much of that is alterable, and what are the criteria for change? Generally, there is a reluctance to reduce the human subject to matter without a soul or some form of Cartesian dualism. The different cultural appeals to the existence of the soul, spirit, mind, atman, *hunpo* were fascinating additions to the current debates on the subject. (Tham 2018b, 205–08) Similarly, discussions on human reproduction draw the bigger picture of destiny, eschatology, kinship, lineage, marriage and societal stability. It widens the scope of the debate centered on costs, safety and autonomy prevalent in the current bioethical analysis. (Tham 2021, 268–73) Even the bread and butter concept of informed consent takes on a new critique through the cultural lens that eschews an atomic view of the individual to a more relational existence. (Tham, Gómez, and Garasic, 2021; Tham and Letendre 2021)

Using narratives or humanistic literature to illustrate the legacy of accumulated human wisdom is not new in bioethics. Leon Kass published an extraordinary collection during his term on the President's Council on Bioethics. (President's Council on Bioethics 2003) Traditions and cultures contain millennial-rich experiences that

can enlighten us as humanity journeys on and warns us about possible pitfalls.

V. Conclusion

We live in a world of increasing tension due to cultural, political and ideological differences. The recent invasion of Ukraine, the pandemic, infodemic, and the polarization of positions make us wonder if it is possible to have meaningful dialogue. The docudrama *Social Dilemma* indicates that social media has further created filter bubbles where we become isolated in our ideology. (Orlowski 2020) Could more forums of interchange and encounter encourage greater tolerance and mutual understanding? Our globe has become more pluralistic, and different moral communities coexist without sufficient knowledge of their neighbors. Can moral strangers become friends through such encounters? (Francis 2020)

Scholars, politicians, and the general public have started cross-cultural, religious and political encounters to promote understanding or ease tensions between differing viewpoints. Ours is one of the many academic experiments within the past decade with modest success. Yet, it shows that cultural and moral diversity does not automatically preclude the prospect of rational dialogue and mutual understanding.

Although our Workshops have been chiefly an intellectual exercise on a small scale, and the methodology is still being refined as we speak, we hope they have provided some theoretical groundings and signposts for others to start similar initiatives.

Culture and religion can make a coherent, substantive, and significant proposal for bioethics. While some think our future rests in technoscience and religion can only put a brake on progress, it may also be true that conservatism of traditions is not a bad thing. The collective wisdom of the centuries can help us ponder and contemplate our future on a surer footing in a fast-paced globe.

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