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Teaching About the Others' Ethics: A Response to Professor John Elias

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BRIAN STILTNER

Teaching About the Others' Ethics: A Response to Professor John Elias

This conference is titled, "What Do We Want the Other to Teach about Our Ethical Traditions?" Professor Elias admirably approached his task by stressing the *what* question, that is, the content of the Christian tradition. I approach my task by commenting on the context and challenges of the *what* question, then asking some related questions: why teach about the other, where and how to teach about the other, and who is teaching about the other? This topic is hard to write about, as Professor Elias said, because it is hard to condense accurately "the Christian tradition" or any of its sub-traditions. In addition, it seems presumptuous to tell Jews and Muslims what they should teach about us. But we can all take comfort in being in the same boat on these matters. The ideal way to approach the matter would be as Rabbi David Fox Sandmel described to an earlier CCJU conference in this series: "In an ideal situation, "we" would not teach about the other at all. Rather, when we want to learn about the other we should invite the other into our classroom or onto our pulpit to teach. The presence of the living, breathing other is itself a lesson that we can never duplicate. I recognize that there are many situations where this is either impossible or impractical, but I say it nonetheless to underscore the delicacy, the challenge of teaching about the other as the other would want us to teach about them." His point is well-taken. What can we do to make such opportunities more common and more practical? And when we can not hear from the other directly, what are some of the beneficial methods and

forums for presenting the other's tradition? Those are questions I will touch on in my response.

It is hardly necessary for me to expand on what Professor Elias wrote. My emendations or interpretations would turn the conversation into an intramural one. He took on this massive task with aplomb. His 30-some pages summarizing the basic methods and paramount concerns of Christian ethics in its three main branches are as good a summary of the field for a nonspecialist as any single article I know. In addressing the *what* question, Professor Elias started with the big picture: "Christian morality is a normative ethics in that it provides the norms or standards by which persons are to live their lives. To be Christian morality, the norms must be related to the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. . . . For Christians, Christian morality must take into account what God has done through Jesus. The ultimate moral question for the Christian should be: How should I live as a follower of Jesus?" Christian ethics occurs when the community that confesses Jesus Christ reflects on values and principles to guide individual and communal actions. Christians seek to pattern themselves after deeds and teachings of Jesus, not so much because he was a great teacher as because he offered a liberating experience of the Divine under the paradigms of freedom and grace. Christian ethics is a thankful response to God.

Christian ethics, similar to Jewish and Muslim ethics, draws upon the sources of Scripture, Tradition, reason, and experience to derive its values and principles. Professor Elias rightly noted that many of our judgments will be the same as yours. This is because we draw upon certain common Scriptures, guard overlapping and parallel traditions, lived through common historical contexts, and especially, because we see our overarching goal as faithfulness to the one God who is the Creator of the universe and who offered a covenant to Abraham.

Professor Elias also rightly noted that there is great variety in the particular judgments arrived at in the Christian community, both as a whole and in the particular denominations. That the sources of Scripture, Tradition, reason, and experience can interact in numerous ways is one of the main reasons for the different patterns found in the three Christian branches. Professor Elias's differentiation of the Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox traditions was adept and helpful in explaining these variations. I want to take a different tack and look at how the ethical variations that

occur within Christianity are parallel to variety of particular judgments found in Judaism and Islam. Thus, we find some Christians agreeing with some Jews and Muslims on a given issue while they disagree with fellow Christians.

Take the example of family life. Jews, Christians, and Muslims have always respected the family as the basic building block of society, the primary vehicle for teaching faith, and the locus of good and holy vocations. None of the traditions have condoned infidelity, rape, incest, or abandonment of spouse and children; none have seen divorce or having children out of wedlock as a preferred path. Yet the traditions work out the acceptable variations differently. So, for example, Catholic and Orthodox Christians have seen celibate life as a worthy alternative to family life; Muslims could historically accept polygamy as a form of faithful marriage; and Jews could build the possibility of divorce into the laws governing marriage. In addition to these tradition-dependent tendencies, we have the phenomenon James Davison Hunter described as the "culture wars": that progressives have more in common with progressives in other religions than with conservatives in their own religion (and vice versa). For instance, many Catholics, evangelical Protestants, Orthodox Jews, and Muslims agree that homosexual relationships fall outside the scope of acceptable family structures and should not be honored with the status of marriage, especially within the religious community. By contrast, many Christians and Jews, and perhaps some Muslims, regard homosexual relations as morally neutral or morally good and want to see greater acceptance for the legitimacy of these relationships in their religious communities. Some congregations have conferred such legitimacy by blessing gay unions.

There are many reasons for this interesting phenomenon, owing to religious traditions and cultural influences. The point here is not how to frame or resolve the debate as to note that the *what* question raises consideration of the contexts that shape the teaching and the challenges and opportunities that arise from these crosscutting patterns. The examples of family and sexual ethics I have just described present challenges such as how to talk to others in our communities across differences, how to portray the other traditions fairly, and how to avoid the attitude that it is all politics—that what is most important about religion is our ethical policies and the strategic alliances we make around them. The cross-

cutting pattern also leads to opportunities such as interreligious dialogue leading to a nuanced understanding of the other and finding common cause with believers against cultural and other external threats to faith. The culture wars thesis is in many ways overstated, but even to the extent that it holds, it is not the last word. Religious traditions themselves do much to support and teach cross-cultural principles such as love, justice, and the Golden Rule.

Why teach about the Other? This question was addressed by Rabbi Tsvi Blanchard in his keynote, but each person who addresses the *what* topic has a *why* in mind; it is helpful to keep attending to it. The overarching reason is that it has to do with the will of God. Believing in God as Creator and Lord of all, we must have respect for every one of God's human creations. Respect is not possible without some understanding, so we teach about the others in order to understand them better and respect them more authentically. Christians should consider themselves as part of a family of Abrahamic faith; they are called to respect, understand, and indeed facilitate the faith of the Abrahamic others. It would be naïve and misleading if I suggested this was a long-standing concern. For instance, until the 1960s, the Catholic Church prayed on Good Friday for the conversion of the Jews, but now we rightly pray that they remain faithful to their covenant.

I believe there is a threefold purpose in any interreligious dialogue and teaching about the other. We teach about the other's ethics in order that our community might better understand the *other*, better understand *ourselves*, and create a context for improved *cooperation* for common causes. Let me try to illustrate how these three goals are carried out, using the example of debates about human cloning and stem cell research.

When Dolly the sheep was cloned in 1997, all religious traditions felt at sea in trying to address this act that had moved abruptly from science fiction to science fact. The first move of most religious bodies was to affirm rather similar principles—that God is the ultimate creator of human life, that each human being deserves respect and the opportunity to develop as a unique individual, that any individual human, however born, will have an individual soul, and that we should take care not to master the creation of life for selfish ends. In the ensuing years, these traditions worked out particular responses under their respective methods of

reasoning. Though there is now some debate over the propriety of therapeutic cloning, major religious traditions maintain a fairly united front against reproductive cloning and they keep a number of issues on the public agenda that might not otherwise be there.

Religious traditions can also benefit from their disagreements. For example, the Catholic Church's positions on cloning, stem cell research, and reproductive technologies are driven by its basic teachings of full respect for the human embryo as an individual human life from the earliest moments, and its natural law teaching about the unity of procreation and sexual expression in marriage. It is hardly right or fair to say that the Catholic Church takes these positions because it is against medical progress or wants to oppress women. When the other learns about the Catholic tradition and vice versa, they find some broad shared concerns, and both sides benefit. Liberal Protestants and Reform Jews, for instance, may find that they share with Catholic teaching a concern about commodifying reproduction and instrumentalizing human life. Though not all members of the Western faiths believe early abortion is morally impermissible, many have found a shared concern that creating embryos for research erodes respect for human life and the reproductive responsibility. Likewise, Catholics need to learn that most arguments in favor of stem cell research are generated not by a desire for technical mastery over the human condition (though some of the biotech pioneers give this impression) but by real concern for mollifying horrendous genetic diseases and helping childless couples achieve their goals of family life. Many American Catholics, if not the Church, have been influenced by arguments differentiating reproductive cloning from therapeutic cloning and the use of spare embryos from the use of embryos created for research. The outcome of such learning is still unclear, but Catholics are no doubt helped by hearing thoughtful arguments from fellow Christians, Muslims, and Jews.

My example still relies mostly on the paradigm of religious communities offering their own views to an interreligious or public dialogue. *Where* does teaching about the other take place? *How* is such teaching carried out, and *how* could it be done better? A list of the contexts includes: the pulpit, the liturgy, adult education, religious education for youth, official religious documents, institutional religious literature, media communications, universities, and centers and programs affiliated

with religious bodies. In all these contexts, in a variety of ways and to a variety of audiences, a religious community communicates its own views and sometimes presents its understanding of the views of the other. Let me comment on a few of the settings. First, religious education is a formative influence. Religious organizations take it seriously but rely upon families to bring their children to the settings where it can happen and to reinforce it at home. Second, the university. My experience is that it is a daunting task teaching about our own and the others' traditions, when the students have only a rudimentary knowledge of both. Catholic universities are wrestling today with the balance of helping students learn more about the tradition they represent along with the multiple traditions of culture and religion. How do we go deep, especially when the students may not have much or any religious background, but also present other religious traditions with enough nuance and detail? Third, adult religious education is a valuable setting for members of a synagogue, mosque, or church to continue growing in their faith as well as learning about the other. Although the opportunities are usually punctual, the learning for an individual can go on over many years. But capitalizing on such opportunities varies widely. My experience and impression is that many Protestant churches do a good job at adult education while Catholic churches find it an uphill battle—if they even try. I do not know what it is like among Jews and Muslims, but I would be interested to learn about it from you.

The last area I want to address is *who*—who is the other in relation to our faith and our ethical traditions? This is not an easy question owing in part to the historical and ongoing inequalities of the relationships. Christians should see Jews as brothers and sisters, in Pope John Paul II's words, "elder brothers in faith." Jews are those who gave a patrimony to Christians—the Scriptures, the laws of Moses, the vision of the prophets, the call to justice, the hope of a messiah. Christians celebrate this deposit of faith, but their celebration has also generated overt claims or subtle suggestions that Christians represent the proper fulfillment of Jewish teaching and are the only heirs of the covenant. Christians should eschew this teaching, known as supersessionism, or even an attitude of it. They should remember that they stand in a similar position *vis-à-vis* Muslims, who claim to have the fuller and complete revelation.

Christians should view both Jews and Muslims as the others who are not so other, who share overlapping and parallel doctrinal foundations

that therefore, lead to overlapping and parallel teachings and methods regarding ethics. They are ones we want to learn more about and with whom we want to cooperate in more constructive ways. They are ones toward whom we owe respect. They are ones from whom we desire respect, knowing that, in many ways, we still have to earn it. Our intersecting histories are fraught. In most societies, Christians have had the greatest numbers and most or all of the political power; too we often used it to the harm of Jews and Muslims. Aware of this, Christians today should feel awkward trying to shape how our tradition is presented in the fellow communities. But we can move toward a more constructive situation by frankly acknowledging and atoning for wrongs we've committed and by teaching more fully and fairly about the other in our communities.

As we suggest to the other how they might teach about us, Christians will have some concerns about how the teaching is presented. Perhaps the major concern is simply about accuracy; they will want such teaching to present, as Professor Elias did, some of the nuance of the overall Christian approach and its subsidiary traditions. Catholics will want such teaching not to reduce its ethics to a rule-based approach, not to focus only on sins and vices, but on its rich preoccupation with virtue and moral/spiritual development; and they will want such presentations not to misstate how the authoritative process works in Catholicism, not to overstate the role of the hierarchy. Protestants will want such teaching by the other not to overstate the role of the individual, as if every Protestant simply makes up his or her own mind after reading the Bible. The Orthodox, I would surmise, will want such teaching, including that by other Christians, to take more account of their contributions. Christians together will want such teaching not to neglect that the deepest foundation of its ethics lie in a belief that the compassion of God was communicated incarnately in Jesus Christ. Though this claim carries us into a realm of profound theological disagreement, it also reminds us that the ethics of all three traditions are unabashedly theocentric.