



Global Faculty Initiative

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seeks to promote the integration
of Christian faith and academic disciplines
by bringing theologians into conversation with scholars
across the spectrum of faculties
in research universities
worldwide.**

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Disciplinary Brief

HOW DIVERSE GLOBAL CULTURAL CONTEXTS CONFOUND AND ENRICH THE CULTIVATION OF VIRTUES

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I work with an organization called Scholar Leaders (SL) that cultivates theological leaders and Christian seminaries from around the globe. Three aspects of Prof. Herdt's essay struck chords with the work of Scholar Leaders, aspects which correspond to our desire to support the *ecclesial*, *inter-religious*, and *social* impact of Majority World theologians. I'll touch briefly on the first two topics (the ecclesial and the interreligious), and camp slightly longer on the third (the social).

The Ecclesial Value of Cultural Diversity

I'll begin with a comment on an ecclesial issue raised by Prof. Herdt's essay. I appreciated that, in Prof. Herdt's discussion of how virtues are developed, she emphasizes the role of communities

that lift up exemplars, pass down inspiring narratives of life lived well amidst circumstances both supportive and challenging, and offer both bracing truth-telling and a sense of belonging within which it becomes possible to face up to our own deep flaws and reaffirm our commitment to develop finer-grained moral discernment and more whole-hearted devotion to the good. (p. 4)

Quite right. To build on that, I might add that believers and theologians from cultural contexts different to one's own can accelerate that process of virtue formation, by shedding light on one's own cultural blind spots. For example, traditional values in many sub-Saharan African tribal communities expose much of the West's preoccupation with productivity as thinly veiled avarice; similarly, Latin American communities' tendencies towards collectivism can sensitize us to the ways when individualism devolves into egoism. So, much as the Global Faculty Initiative is careful to curate insights from scholars worldwide, universities and seminaries concerned to cultivate the virtues should likewise be seeking the witness of global believers,

whose biographies and theologies can help grind out culturally engrained vices.

Virtue Acquisition across the Abrahamic Religions

Moving to a second area of Scholar Leader's work—interreligious relations, especially with Muslims—my attention was caught by Prof. Herdt's discussion of the difference between pagan and Christian virtues (p. 9). She invoked Augustine's belief that "pagan pursuit of virtue was a pursuit of glory and honor for the self" whereas "Christian virtues were grounded in humble acceptance of grace and oriented to God, not self." While not denying the degrees of virtue on display amongst pagans, their failure to acknowledge God entails that their virtues are never properly oriented towards the right ultimate end. "Pagan virtue could thus be seen as oriented to a good proximate or penultimate end, even if not ... to God as ultimate end" (p. 9).

I agree that virtue is most properly itself when it is oriented towards God. But how does this construal of virtue apply to the members of the Jewish or Muslim faiths, whose piety *is* oriented towards God (even if Christianity differs in profound ways from Judaism and Islam in our Trinitarian understanding of God). Given the theocentricity of Judaism and Islam, would Prof. Herdt consider Muslims and Jews to be disadvantaged in the acquisition or orientation of the virtues? Or, alternatively, might there be ways in which Christian cultivation of virtue can be quickened or chastened by aspects of Jewish and Muslim practice (perhaps the diligence of Jewish Sabbath observance, or the temperance of Islamic fasting)?

Virtues Across Cultures and Institutions: The Case of Sexual Misconduct

The third and final area of Prof. Herdt's essay that intrigued me was the discussion of virtues in society (particularly, in institutions and universities). It caught my attention because SL is coordinating a new initiative called *No More*, which seeks to confront sexual misconduct in global seminaries (and by extension, in churches), in order to make seminaries safer and holier places, especially for women. As Prof. Herdt explored the ways that institutions can cultivate virtues and vices, and as she gestured towards some of the moral and immoral tendencies especially susceptible to propagation in the university, I wondered how to zero in on the virtues that are most germane to the topics of sexual harassment, abuse, and rectitude. Courage to tell the truth, honesty, and justice all came to mind, especially as pertains to supporting victims and dealing with perpetrators; all too often cowardice in the face of power or social pressure leads to silence, and thereby to complicity. Prudence to navigate complex cases and the occasional questionable accusation would be key; precisely because we must heed the general admonitions to "believe women" and to decry victim-blaming, great wisdom and intentionality must be applied to adjudicate potential instances of false accusations. Temperance against lust surely is relevant, as is the cultivation of holy love, for without these the sorts of affections appropriate to the believing community can devolve into perversions that shatter Christian communion. Since *No More* focuses specifically on the idiosyncratic sort of institute of higher education that is a seminary, surely these virtues

can be foregrounded in our efforts.

I also asked myself how different cultural characteristics (as per my first point in this note) might conduce to or impede efforts to confront sexual misconduct in seminaries. Since SL is a global fellowship, the *No More* project is comprised of scholars from around the globe. This enables us to resource one another with the cultural and traditional strengths of our respective regions. That said, I do not mean to indicate that one culture is more virtuous than another. The characteristics of a given culture often have both virtuous and vicious underpinnings. Consider the North Atlantic emphases on freedom and the control of women over their bodies. These cultural emphases are substantially rooted in virtues such as justice and/or protection for the vulnerable, but they are at least susceptible to distortion by egotism or libertinism. Or one might think of modesty—a strong value in the MENA region—as pertinent to the topic of sexual misconduct, but is Middle Eastern modesty an expression of temperance or of the unjust repression of women? To select a final example: chastity is a prominent value in many African cultures, and surely chastity and self-control are virtues lacking in men who exceed the limits of appropriate sexual conduct...but attention to chastity and purity is also cited as a cause for female genital mutilation in a variety of African nations. So, it is perhaps less simple than it might appear at first glance to invoke diverse cultural perspectives as resources for stimulating the acquisition of virtue in global communities.

Future Challenges and Persistent Questions

In this light, we must ask how different cultural and religious contexts can feed our understanding and cultivation of virtue, and how we might filter out any vicious underpinnings of a given cultural tendency. What guidance can we obtain for promoting virtue and confronting vice in global education (especially global theological education), without falling into the opposite traps of colonialism and relativism? Finally, how can we creatively imagine the ways that the *No More* project could cultivate the virtues relevant to diminishing sexual abuse and harassment in seminaries, both in the West and around the world? This latter question, in a different register, applies forcefully to research universities wherever they are found.

Further Reading

Boon, Mike. *The African Way: The Power of Interactive Leadership*. Johannesburg: Zebra, 2007.

A non-theological illustration of how Sub-Saharan African traditional cultures can enrich aspects of South African society that have been damaged by exploitative components of Occidental practices and values.

De La Torre, Miguel. *Latina/o Social Ethics: Moving Beyond Eurocentric Moral Thinking*. New Perspectives in Latina/o Religion. Waco, TX: Baylor, 2010.

A helpful work for exposing and problematizing the hegemonic influence of Eurocentric values in North American theological ethics.

Greenman, Jeffrey P., and Gene L. Green, eds. *Global Theological in Evangelical Perspective: Exploring the Contextual Nature of Theology and Mission*. Downer's Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012.

An engaging and accessible compendium by Majority World theologians who demonstrate how global Christian theology enriches and corrects the culturally embedded theological discourse of the West.

Mosher, Lucinda, ed. *A World of Inequalities: Christian and Muslim Perspectives*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2021.

A collection of essays from both Christian and Muslim scholars illustrating how their respective religious traditions shape their approach to a wide range of social issues.

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