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**Cultures of Comparison and Traditions of Scholarship: Holism and Inculturation in Religious Ethics[[1]](#endnote-1)**

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Comparative religious ethics as a distinct field of inquiry links longstanding philosophical questions about the good and the right to the historical, social-scientific and literary study of religious cultures. It has become, over its more than thirty year genesis, an intriguing conversation within religious studies. Contributions to that conversation have formed their own tradition of scholarship, in the sense of an ongoing argument prompted and guided by a shared set of questions about a subject matter: the practical implications of the beliefs and practices of the many religious communities around the globe.[[2]](#endnote-2) Many of the questions—about moral theory, virtue and culture, subjectivity and language—that brought earlier generations of comparative ethics scholars together recur in the work of this volume’s authors, who view themselves as part of an ongoing project to understand the nature and direction of a distinctly religious ethics. Other questions—about the global significance of culturally specific practices that influence moral formation and cultural identity, about gender, embodiment, technology and many more besides—relate to the field’s earlier ones, but these new questions stand to become classics of their own in the future as religious ethics takes more seriously religious and cultural differences in light of the power and global scope of religious discourse.

Bringing the classic questions of an earlier generation to a new generation of scholars with their own experiences and interests requires that we undertake the difficult work of understanding and appreciating our intellectual forebears. Appreciating classics of any kind, including classic approaches to religious ethics, requires that we recover not only the methods and substantive studies generated by those approaches but the questions that gave rise to those approaches in the first place. Classics prove their status when the questions that prompted their production stand the test of time, even as previous answers to those questions require careful examination and critique by each new generation.[[3]](#endnote-3)

The classic religious ethics question that concerns me in this essay comes from the first two waves of religious ethics scholarship in the United States (roughly from the late 1970s into 80s, followed by a recasting and redefinition of the field in the 90s and into the new millennium): *What is required to treat religious cultures holistically when comparing their moral worlds?* I am interested in this question for two reasons. First, revisiting the notion of a holistic approach to culture reminds us that, although religious ethics is now expanding the scope of religious and moral discourse it examines and the cultural practices it observes, scholars of the present generation cannot sidestep the basic theoretical questions that occupied participants in earlier conversations. It is very important to revisit those questions, as often as possible, to cast old but revealing light on what we are doing now.

Second, revisiting the classic question of culture allows us a vantage point from which to ask what other cross-disciplinary conversations might prove helpful for comparative ethics scholarship today. The present author comes to the conversation in comparative religious ethics deeply formed by scholarship in comparative theology, a field that roughly parallels in time, style, and intellectual heritage the development of comparative religious ethics over the last several decades. Comparative theology invests its scholars in “acts of faith seeking understanding which are rooted in a particular faith tradition but which, from that foundation, venture into learning from one or more other faith traditions.”[[4]](#endnote-4) For the comparative theologian, a holistic view of a religious culture is crucial, and this requires investigating the basic ideas and practices of religious traditions in comparative perspective. But it also involves a careful consideration of the deepest religious questions of the persons who constitute that culture, in conversation with the most profound (and often unsettled) religious questions that guide the comparative theologian’s home tradition. In this way, comparative investigations are able to examine accounts for the dynamic inter-relationship between the subject matter (for our present purpose, religious ethics) and the one who studies it (the scholar of religious ethics). My goal will be to show that the comparative theologian’s reflexive relation to her or his own subject matter has a rough analogue in early philosophical discussions in comparative ethics about holistic approaches to culture, even if those earlier conversations were not cast in terms of comparative theology. I hope this suggestion will be taken as a call for a slightly more hermeneutically inclusive comparative ethics conversation. It is certainly not meant to be a call for all comparative ethicists to become comparative theologians, but I would suggest that religious ethics without a comparative theological element misses something basic about the nature of religious communities and the nature of the internal debates and practical innovations that constitute them.

In this essay, I argue that present and future scholarship in comparative ethics ought to remain sensitive to the prevailing *questions* that formed each generation of scholars if the field is to continue as a productive scholarly community and as a coherent discipline of inquiry. For an academic discipline is constituted not only by the history of its discourse, but through the persons that have been concerned with a set of common questions. In place of the former, where we might speak of charting a genealogy of comparative ethics, I would like to speak here of a family history of comparative ethics, in order to highlight a certain style in which we ought to think about the intellectual struggles and sensibilities of those who shaped the field we now call comparative religious ethics.

To do so will require that we keep in mind two important topics that are not always held together in the present configuration of the field: (1) the relationship between religious traditions and the variety of methods employed to study them, and (2) the intellectual histories of those comparativists that have gone before us. The intellectual histories of prior generations of comparativists matter because they chart trajectories through which one set of classic questions or concerns about the meaning of religious ethics leads to other important questions and concerns. In this paper, I examine how returning to one particular classic question in comparative ethics--the relationship between *religion* and *culture*--can reveal important insights from the past that also signal new ways of thinking about the comparative ethics future. It will also offer us an important lesson from the family history about what it means to study religious and moral differences together, as a community of scholars committed to preserving each others’ questions even when we differ on what to make of the answers. This style of engagement, I suggest, would build important bridges to other conversation, especially those in comparative theology.

The question of how to relate religion and culture through the comparative study of ethics has concerned both philosophers and historians of religion who, not surprisingly, held different views about what these terms meant and how they related to the method and results of comparative ethics. One early debate relating religion and culture to ethics focused on what it meant to take a “*holistic*” approach to comparative ethics. Should holism be defined by the historians, anthropologists and sociologists of religion and culture who wanted to examine the fine threads of culture while respecting cultural wholeness? Or should holism be defined by philosophers concerned with moral questions, whose understanding of holism represented not just a normative program for comparative ethics but also an evaluative judgment about which philosophy had earned the right to speak for moral philosophy in interdisciplinary conversations?

In the first part of this paper, I revisit this debate to show how the relationship between religion and culture in comparative ethics today is linked to an earlier moment in the family history of this tradition of scholarship, to which present discussions are now returning.[[5]](#endnote-5) I suggest that some of the earliest impulses toward holism (as in the work of David Little and Sumner Twiss) were right to seek a balance between offering descriptions true to a religious culture’s own self-understanding while highlighting those self-critical moments in religious traditions. In those moments, holists hoped to understand how and why members of those traditions struggled with their own values and moral languages in conversation with each other and with the scholars who studied them. As David Little observed as far back as 1974, comparative religious ethics must attend to the different ways that religious traditions employ practical reasoning, and this includes how religious traditions relate proximate and ultimate values as they confront new situations and social problems.

By studying what Little called “the relation of patterns of religious-ethical meaning to socio-economic institutional life,” scholars of comparative ethics provide the religious traditions they study with important resources for critical self-examination.[[6]](#endnote-6) The sort of holism I see in early comparative ethics was a holism encompassing the scholar’s own questions and concerns *and* the questions and concerns of the communities the scholar studied as proper objects of comparative analysis. In other words, this wider form of holism asked whether the question of the distinctly “moral” and “religious” brought by certain kinds of philosophical studies of religious ethics might echo long-standing and deep conversations within religious traditions about the kinds of claims those traditions make about what concerns them most. In the first part of the paper, I will differentiate the *continuous holism* of Little and Twiss which hoped to link the deep questions about moral and religious life that scholars and their objects of study shared from the *distant holism* exemplified in the work of Jeffrey Stout. While Stout’s critiques of Little and Twiss were helpful in gaining clarity about the limits of the sort of philosophical tools they employed, Stout left comparative ethics with a way of looking at moral worlds that ultimately distanced scholars from the people whose religious and moral worlds they studied.

In the second part of this paper, I ask what kind of relationship between the comparativist and the traditions studied would be required if we are to recover and advance the sort of continuous holism just mentioned. By developing the notion that comparativists are engaged in a tradition-creating form of scholarship, I hope to show that comparisons must proceed sensitive to the effects their work might have on the communities they study. This will require a deep transparency on the part of the scholar about why she or he is interested in the traditions under examination, precisely because those inhabiting such traditions today will want to enter conversations with comparativists with sufficient knowledge about the kind of investment scholars have in their traditions. Only with such assurance will people in traditions be open to trusting scholars with their religious inheritance and to learning from scholars about how to see their home traditions in new and constructive ways.

To illustrate this dynamic between scholars and the religious communities they study, I will contrast two different senses of tradition-creating comparative work. On the one hand, we have the recent proposal by Lee Yearley that comparativists are constantly led to the work of “emendation” in the moral and religious worlds they examine. Emendation is self-consciously tradition-creating and should rightly be acknowledged as such, but it does so with minimal awareness or concern for how those emendations will affect the life of the religious community that inherits them or how such emendations will affect the relationship between the scholar and the religious community. On the other hand, we have examples of tradition-creating comparative work taking place within the religious communities themselves. As an example of such work, I consider recent proposals by African Catholic moral theologians working on theologies of inculturation. I argue that these scholars are also dealing in tradition-creating comparative work, but the impulse to compare is different because they are asking about the way moral truth can be expressed through different cultural forms, some of which are legitimately new and in fact necessary to the wider life of their communities of faith. My aim will be to position the tradition-creating dimension of comparative ethics between the kind of emendations Yearley describes and the more fully tradition-bound comparisons happening in theologies of inculturation.

In the third and final part of the paper, I will draw together my reflections on religion and culture in comparative ethics on the one hand and on emendation and theologies of inculturation on the other by suggesting how the comparativist ought to view her or his relationship with the traditions studied. I will suggest that comparative ethics in an age of globalism should continue to develop the field’s early impulse toward a continuous holism, but one that takes more seriously the extent to which comparative ethics has an inescapable tradition-creating dimension to its work. To foster this kind of comparative sensibility, I suggest that comparativists begin by imagining an analogy between their responsibility to other scholars in the field and their responsibilities to the traditions they study. To come to terms with the intellectual histories of our fellow scholars (rather than simply their arguments and constructive proposals), with all the frustration and misunderstanding that such conversations often entail, prepares us for the sort of long-term relationship we will have with the religious traditions we study. For just as we engage in academic study to communicate to others something we judge important, so too should we think that a similar if slightly different dynamic might be in play for members of religious traditions that might be affected by what we say about the traditions we study. As unlikely as it might sometimes seem, comparative religious ethics is public work, even if we cannot predict which “public” will be affected by its findings.[[7]](#endnote-7)

**I. Religion and Culture in Recent Comparative Ethics**

The relationship between religion and culture has presented comparative ethics with a series of problems, summarized as follows: (1) the problem of culture in comparative method, (2) the problem of culture as source for comparison, and (3) the problem of the comparativist’s cultural perspective.[[8]](#endnote-8) It is worth noting that these problems are in a sense cumulative, both in terms of how comparative ethics has changed over time and also in terms of the levels of complexity emerging in the discussions as a result of each successive addition.

The first problem of culture in comparative method is probably the earliest of these, and its significance was apparent in the cornerstone text *Comparative Religious Ethics: A New Method* by David Little and Sumner Twiss and in subsequent critical assessments of that book offered by Donald Swearer and Jeffrey Stout.[[9]](#endnote-9) Little and Twiss set out to develop a method for comparing apparently disparate cultural systems that combined Max Weber’s attempt “to understand the ‘logical relations or the internal structure of cultural values,’” with their own philosophical concern to understand “what are the essential defining characteristics of morality and related concepts, what are the features that distinguish these notions from, say, law and legal notions, or custom and matters of etiquette.”[[10]](#endnote-10) For this latter emphasis, Little and Twiss employed the work of John Ladd, a philosopher with the comparative foresight to have conducted his own fieldwork among the Navajo in the early 1950s in the service of developing the field of “descriptive ethics.”

Ladd had considered the problem of how to balance the cultural specificity of moral language and the internal coherence of unfamiliar worlds of thought with discernment of a culture’s “ethical ideas as a system of ideas.”[[11]](#endnote-11) He noted that his own attempt at a descriptive ethics of Navaho culture linked “the new approach in moral philosophy with its emphasis on language and discourse” with the “current trends in anthropology, such as the increasing stress put on obtaining an exact record of the informant’s statements.”[[12]](#endnote-12) Although his period of fieldwork was somewhat brief (December 1951-January 1952), and his view of anthropology’s work rather narrow, he undertook his investigations from a conviction that the work of the philosopher ought to be most closely concerned with the work of “ethical reconstruction” as “a kind of jigsaw puzzle. Usually we have the conclusion and some premises. The task is to reconstruct the missing premises and mode of inference” and then ask whether these reconstructions can be “empirically confirmed or disconfirmed, by the statements the informant makes.”[[13]](#endnote-13) Ladd was confident that his questioning of local “informants,” especially those revered by the community as wise or “elders” could reveal basic patterns in the moral thinking among the Navaho. He thought he did not need to examine the full complement of Navaho culture in order to learn something accurate, if only provisionally formulated, about Navaho moral thought. For Ladd, to understand “from the inside” meant to understand how particular persons in cultures thought through moral problems given attendant cultural values with specific attention to the meaning of statements, rather than understanding the complex relations of meaning in a wider cultural system.

Little and Twiss wished to move beyond Ladd’s work while maintaining certain continuities with it, and the form of that move represented an important indication of what a holist approach to comparative ethics would look like. First, as an exercise in descriptive ethics, Little and Twiss wanted to “compare kinds or types of practical reasoning in different religious settings” in order to “demonstrate some different ways in which practitioners have undertaken to give reasons in support of their respective codes of conduct.”[[14]](#endnote-14) Second, they sought to widen the pool of data from which moral descriptions would be drawn, so that even though they too were interested in explicating strategies of practical justification, they preferred to do so within a wider notion of religious culture that was not reducible to the logical relations among moral statements made by cultural informants. Culture, they said, was “like a rule book that creates the world or environment in which the game of morality takes place,”[[15]](#endnote-15) whereas religion and morality were both specified functionally within culture as “offering reasons for action.”[[16]](#endnote-16)

Yet when they offered their preliminary definition of religion, Little and Twiss noted that religion addresses “certain ‘boundary situations’ in human life and experience, and they are encountered at at least three points: (1) in trying to make sense out of the felt inexplicability of the natural (and social) world, its existence and purpose, and its processes and events; (2) in trying to cope with the obdurate presence of suffering and death; and (3) in trying to live with and manage the ambiguities and puzzles inherent in human conduct.”[[17]](#endnote-17) Religion addresses these basic interpretive problems of human life, but it does so through a number of different avenues, including “conceptually, emotionally, and practically.”[[18]](#endnote-18) It is important to note, in light of the critiques that followed on their project, that Little and Twiss viewed each of these avenues of interpretation as corresponding to a certain kind of activity: “of adhering to a cosmology, (or mythic world view), expressing certain attitudes and emotions, and acting in certain prescribed ways.”[[19]](#endnote-19) In casting religion in this way, they resisted attempts to reduce religion to the interplay of “the essential religious emotion and the essential religious practice,” or the subjective and behavioral practice respectively. But religious discourse maintains a connection between the elucidation of concepts embedded within a cosmological system and the subjective and behavioral aspects of religion.

What is interesting about this move, and why it is important to recall as we discern the shape that a holistic comparative ethics would take, is that Little and Twiss sought to preserve a certain philosophical impulse *within* religious discourse which was related to but not reducible to the rational expression of its moral ideas. A holistic approach to comparative ethics would require both an examination of the action guides at work in a religious system, including the examination of the reasons people give for guiding their actions in specific ways, but also an examination of the values of a cultural system that could be formulated either as moral norms or as virtues of persons in communities.[[20]](#endnote-20)

This style of holism, which sought continuities between scholarly questions about religion and ethics and the cultural systems scholars studied, can be helpfully illustrated if we compare it with two other kinds of holism advocated by two early critics of Little and Twiss’s project.[[21]](#endnote-21) Donald Swearer’s critique, later echoed by Frank Reynolds and Robin Lovin, emphasized the tendency to distort the logics internal to a religious framework as a coherent and complex cosmology if one holds too closely to a set of analytic tools derived from a foreign philosophical framework. In such an instance, one loses *cultural holism* and therefore, Swearer judged, comparative religious ethics ought to be understood instead primarily as a subset of “comparative or cross-cultural studies.”[[22]](#endnote-22) This sort of holism, which seeks to account for a greater level of refinement and internal tension in religious worlds, will naturally be resistant to being redefined by any philosophical conversation, perhaps especially the analytic mode that prizes the specificity and logical relations among moral concepts.

Jeffrey Stout’s critiques of Little and Twiss’ comparative project came from a different angle, but interestingly were also cast as an argument about the proper form of holism for comparative ethics.[[23]](#endnote-23) His argument made two points, both pressing on what it means for comparative ethics to be holistic yet also maintain continuity with philosophical discussions about religion. The first point was that any attempt to specify distinctly “moral” or “religious” aspects of a cultural context would need to account for those philosophical critiques that doubted the stability of concepts and the idea of inherent meanings in terms. [[24]](#endnote-24) He suggested that instead of opting for the kind of holism that sought the internal logic of an entire cultural system, one should rather look to the holism characterizing slices of intellectual history.[[25]](#endnote-25) Instead of trying to understand cultural wholes as Swearer had suggested, Stout argued that comparative ethics should rather look for how moral language is used at relatively confined times within the histories of cultures when certain key moral notions were under debate. This kind of circumscribed intellectual holism does not require detailed observation of different religious cultures or a close scholarly contact with those cultures, although it does require detailed knowledge of how moral language is used within social and intellectual histories.

Stout’s second point was that such holism required not only a familiarity with the social and intellectual histories under investigation, but also a commitment to a certain philosophy of language and theory of normative discourse that could establish the proper way to understand those histories.[[26]](#endnote-26) He specified this in terms of a set of unifying commitments to a certain theory of meaning (semantic holism), a theory of justification (epistemological holism), and a theory of interpretation (hermeneutical holism).[[27]](#endnote-27)

Stout argued that the best way to think about philosophy’s interaction with other approaches to religious ethics (including anthropology as a subset of the social sciences) was to examine historical instances where the use of moral terminology changed, particularly in those “revolutionary” instances where “relatively specific moral judgments were being used to place moral principles in question and to justify innovative departures from traditional linguistic habits.”[[28]](#endnote-28) It was only fitting, then, that his philosophical analogue to the process of moral change in religious traditions would be a single line of development in philosophy (the rise and fall of logical empiricism and its replacement by a certain form of pragmatism), where one narrative runs the course of its explanatory power until it can no longer account for the data under consideration. But such an interpretive strategy only functions for moral discourse in religious traditions if one assumes that religious traditions are rather confined sorts of wholes, where a change in moral discourse comes about as a sort of intellectual defense rather than as a gradual unfolding within different historical times and cultural contexts of a tradition’s deepest insights.

Stout tried to cast his remarks about holism in terms of a wider hermeneutical holism, which he thought was broader than the epistemological concerns seeking precise conceptual limits in the service of methodological clarity. The problem, however, is that the alleged capaciousness of Stout’s holism still assumed a rather narrow model of philosophical engagement, one forged in the history of philosophy’s dialogue with the sciences on the one hand and the events of European religious wars (and more recently Western democratic experiments) on the other.[[29]](#endnote-29) While Stout was critical that Little and Twiss focused on specifying the meaning of moral and religious concepts within the traditions they studied in a way that did not allow them to track change in conceptual usage over time, his own focus on conceptual usage only at tumultuous points in religious history presents a different problem, but equally removed from the histories of religious cultures. Internal diversity and self-criticism within religious traditions sometimes happen in ways far less momentous and far more gradual.

The sort of holism that Little and Twiss brought to their study was certainly not a thorough-going cultural holism of the kind Swearer wanted, but it did try to let different religious traditions speak in a diversity of voices, by relying on philosophical and anthropological studies, while still presenting a conversation on matters relevant to ethics. Put differently, Little and Twiss offered a project that embraced a holism *continuous* with a wide array of questions and concerns carried on by the traditions they studied. Stout, on the other hand, preferred a sort of holism continuous only with certain key points in the histories of cultures’ use of moral concepts but ultimately one that kept the scholar *distant* from the culture’s deep moral questions.

As a result of Stout’s critiques, an important and valuable aspect of Little and Twiss’ project was obscured, even if those critiques were warranted to some degree by the kind of philosophical framework that Little and Twiss adopted. They had attempted an important advance in comparative engagement, raising the question of how a philosophical approach to ethics might be reconciled with an ethnographic approach to culture. Moreover, they rightly saw that the scholar of ethics will inevitably bring some of her or his own moral questions to the cultures they encounter and that these could form productive lines of inquiry. It was telling that Little and Twiss’ first case-study of the Navaho employed the work of a philosopher who had also conducted fieldwork, rather than an anthropologist who became interested in ethics as a result of having previously held normative commitments destabilized through fieldwork.[[30]](#endnote-30) While they followed John Ladd as their initial guide to descriptive ethics and Navaho culture, they did not judge his descriptions of the moral code of the Navaho sufficiently connected with other important and morally relevant cultural features. As Stout himself would later note, citing Ladd, “The questioning of informants can itself produce ‘an artificial logical construction not corresponding to any “natural” ethics.’…Anthropologists often settle for something less than historical narrative because the data out of which a narrative might be constructed are unavailable.”[[31]](#endnote-31)

The question was whether that “natural ethics” was in principle available for study and what balance of philosophy, ethnography, and history would allow the comparativist both to describe it properly and also use it for some constructive purpose. What is interesting, however, is that the discussion of *which* philosophy might helpfully interact with historical and ethnographic research has not progressed very far from the “first wave” of Little and Twiss, Stout and Swearer, to the recently characterized “third wave.”[[32]](#endnote-32) Stout’s critique seemed to narrow the range of allowable philosophies emerging from the religious traditions studied to those that took up the problem of conceptual meaning and the use of moral ideas. While Little and Twiss employed some of those philosophical insights, their method was actually more flexible and pragmatic because it used both anthropological research and philosophical discourse. Moreover, they recognized that one could locate multiple (sometimes quite different) strands of philosophical thinking within the same religious tradition.

With respect to diverse philosophical voices within religious traditions, Little and Twiss’ continuous holism found support several years latter in the comparative philosophy of religion discussions of the mid 80s. For example, Paul Griffiths suggested that a responsible comparison of different moral systems ought at least to consider that longstanding religious traditions usually have more than one philosophical impulse or style. In his examination of early Indian Buddhist philosophy, Griffiths isolated what he called both a “naturalized” and a “denaturalized” discourse.[[33]](#endnote-33) A naturalized discourse was one that operated at the level of ordinary language and spoke to human concerns for truth in a way that was continuous with the power of religious narratives. A denaturalized discourse, on the other hand, sought a form of argumentation that would purify itself of the distinctive elements of its religious narrative in order to render it compelling as an option for adherence to those not accepting its religious narrative. Griffiths saw this move both in Indian Abhidharma philosophy but also in the philosophical traditions of the West.

Another option, offered by Frank Reynolds and also drawn from Buddhist sources, was that a single religious tradition might contain different cosmologies because of the diverse and sometimes divergent sources that created it. This variety gave rise to different forms of philosophical reflection grounding different modes of moral action.[[34]](#endnote-34) There is nothing problematic with isolating particular philosophical styles in religious traditions, even if those styles move toward more systematic and all-inclusive statements as the Abhidharma does, but these styles must be examined in light of the systems into which they fit. Such an approach honors the concerns of both Stout and Swearer about early comparative projects that used one particular (and for Stout, discredited) philosophical framework to specify the moral and religious domains of a cultural system, but it would also take seriously that religious traditions do themselves at various points either develop or adopt philosophical systems that ground comparative thought and offer rationales for inter-cultural engagement. These should certainly not be left out of the conversations that comparativists have with historians and anthropologists about comparative method.

I noted above that the early debates about holism in comparative method were actually centered on an issue that is now returning to comparative ethics: the place of other disciplines, especially anthropology, in the comparative study of ethics.[[35]](#endnote-35) This debate turned on the extent to which philosophical concerns and methods would drive comparative ethics, but it was equally about how to relate the comparativist’s own philosophical perspective on moral matters to the coherence of the religious cultures compared. In the next section of this paper, I take up the question of how the comparativist ought to relate, in the spirit of Little and Stout, to the traditions they study. This will prompt us to consider two examples of comparison as a kind of tradition-creating work: Lee Yearley’s reflection on the task of emendation in comparison and the work of contemporary Catholic theologians of inculturation thinking about a similar comparative problem but from within commitments to a religious tradition.

**II. Two Examples of Continuous Holism: Emendation and Inculturation**

To engage with religious traditions through explicit comparisons means to present them with new options for their future, some of which will be integrated into the lives of their communities and some of which will not. Compatible with the continuous holism initiated by Little and Twiss, Lee Yearley has spoken of the relationship between the scholar and the tradition he or she studies. In his recent work on the ways that scholars approach classic religious texts from different traditions, Yearley has encouraged comparativists to embrace the “need for development of the ideas found in the traditional texts, a process that involves two enterprises: elaboration and emendation.”[[36]](#endnote-36) Elaboration describes the work of modern scholars to “understand the language and context of the text…especially important with the ideas that appear in forms that either cause them to be easily misunderstood or allow their challenge to be easily overlooked.” Emendation, on the other hand, seeks to “clarify, test and reformulate the ideas the text presents. It involves complex decisions about what is and is not fundamental to the traditional texts and can lead us to attitudes that differ from those that underlie the process of emendation, attitudes that can range from spiritual regret to sober rejection.”[[37]](#endnote-37)

Yearley acknowledges that the comparativist’s emendations are “complicated and possibly dangerous” reformulations, but nonetheless comparativists

must reformulate these ideas and practices in a way that is appropriate to, shows appreciative fidelity toward, their meanings as judged by the most basic norms found in the tradition. But it must also reformulate them in a way that is credible to (meets the conditions of plausibility found in) our common contemporary experience, informed as that experience is by modern scientific explanations, historical consciousness, and ideas about the rights of all humans.[[38]](#endnote-38)

Insofar as the process of emendation that Yearley outlines reformulates ideas present in classic texts but sensitive to present concerns, we might view this kind of activity as one whereby the scholar creates some aspect or avenue of thought in the tradition studied. However, while Yearley cautions that reformulation should only happen in the context of “appreciative fidelity” toward the traditions in question, he does not give a clear sense of what such fidelity would entail. While it clearly involves some sense of the “non-negotiables” of a tradition’s moral outlook, it does not imply any ongoing conversation with members of the traditions in question, nor does it acknowledge any accountability for the effects that one’s emendations might have on the traditions in question. So while Yearley’s notion of emendation provides a helpful link to the continuous holism of Little and Twiss, it does not provide us with guidelines for how the comparativist should understand her or his responsibility for the tradition-creating force of the comparisons drawn.

I would like to suggest that the relationship between the comparativist and the traditions compared might helpfully begin if we first ask that question: *What prompts comparison?* Each scholar presumably has some sense of how to answer this question in reference to her or his own work. Yearley himself was clear enough about his own motives: to “examine and develop ideas of the self and virtue in traditional classics in order to illuminate where we as moderns encounter the sacred.”[[39]](#endnote-39) This was an answer that depended upon a certain account of modern selves, and an implied project of “natural theology,” one not substantially accountable to ongoing traditions of religious thought.[[40]](#endnote-40) While Yearley’s focus on emendation is an important acknowledgement of comparison’s tradition-creating power, I believe the comparativist must take a further step to ask how, if at all, the comparativist’s rationale for undertaking comparison relates to the different rationales for comparative engagement available in the traditions the comparativist studies.

A helpful example of this may be found if we look to one religious tradition that is currently undertaking comparative work from within a set of tradition-specific commitments and in a context where the tradition is coming to a deeper appreciation of its own internal cultural diversity. The Roman Catholic Christian community has begun to think through these issues more deliberately in recent years, and this has produced a fresh line of inquiry in Catholic theological ethics around the topic of theologies of inculturation. This discussion has also prompted Catholic theologians to think more deeply about their community’s own rationales for comparative engagement.

The problem of culture in Catholic theology has become especially pronounced in what many contemporary Catholic theologians have come to speak of as the “World Church.” By this is meant not just the fact that Catholic Christian communities exist worldwide, but more importantly the community’s self-conscious recognition that there are people around the globe who share their same faith, even as they have very different views about its history, its practices, and the kinds of commitments and conversations it requires of its participants at this moment in history.[[41]](#endnote-41) Moreover, for Catholic Christians in some areas of the world, “culture” has become an unfortunately freighted term and has grounded such polarizations as the “culture of life” and the “culture of death”[[42]](#endnote-42) and also efforts to separate out the truths of the faith from cultures in which faith claims were first articulated so as to bring clarity to particular moral practices in the Church.

Catholics are not alone in this heritage of Christians analyzing their cultures, as Paul Tillich once famously described the relation of religion and culture in the following terms: “Religion as ultimate concern is the meaning-giving substance of culture, and culture is the totality of forms in which the basic concern of religion expresses itself. In abbreviation: religion is the substance of culture; culture is the form of religion.”[[43]](#endnote-43) In terms more open to mutual enrichment of religion and culture, H. Richard Niebuhr judged that each Christian commits herself or himself to a life-long dialogue between Christ and culture. As Niebuhr put it, “Given these two realities—Christ and culture—an infinite dialogue must develop in the Christian conscience and the Christian community.”[[44]](#endnote-44) For Niebuhr, culture was both a creator and carrier of values in a myriad of human forms, and it is culture’s focus on value that makes it both central and challenging to theological discourse. The reason for this is straightforward: the values that arise in a particular culture may complement or be in conflict with the values which a theological tradition is committed to preserving and advancing. An overly simplistic, if theologically common, way to approach this question has been to make an assessment of a culture’s values (whatever those might be) and then either to affirm or oppose those by appeal to the competing and corrective values of a religious community.

The problem is that neither cultures nor religious traditions are so unified as to be able to locate such values easily. Insofar as cultures carry the capacity for change, we are always locating values after the fact, critiquing expressions that have already moved on to other modes of expression. More often than not, they are hidden in patterns of discourse and community activities that make judgments about values or cultures as value-carriers problematic. In a recent article on the “cultural turn” in religious ethics, Richard Miller has noted that an approach to human culture useful for religious ethics ought to consider as wide an array of sources as possible, focusing on the more every-day aspects of human culture, in part because of the moral complexity embedded within the everyday.[[45]](#endnote-45) Yet just as religious ethics must always move back and forth between an “ethics-near” approach (that “immerses the researcher in the vernacular moral vocabularies of individuals and institutions”) and an “ethics-distant” approach (one that “abstracts from moral particulars to craft impersonal principles as guides for individual or social criticism, policy assessment, and the like”), so does a similar movement happen within religious cultures.[[46]](#endnote-46) Notwithstanding the tendencies within some religious communities to simplify cultural values, others in those communities are forthright about the complexity of religious engagement with culture. Those who live between cultures are equally drawn to the question of how to sort out the valuable and the vicious elements within the various cultures of which they are a part. It is to this problem, I suggest, that current discussions about theology of inculturation might be helpfully directed, especially insofar as they highlight the rationales for comparison that emerge within a tradition’s religious and moral discourse.

The term *inculturation* is used in Christian theological discourse to denote a process of theological and moral discernment whereby the valuable and life-giving components of a culture are affirmed and retained and the destructive and life-suppressing components of that culture are left behind. Inculturation implies that something in the new culture is both valuable and deeply important to expressing the home culture’s deepest values and goals, but it also implies that the religious tradition in question is, at least in some important respects, the basis from which to evaluate the various cultures. Many theologians of inculturation begin their discussions with reference to characterizations of culture that have been common to anthropologists from Tylor to Geertz, adapting them to theological context.[[47]](#endnote-47) So, for example, while mission historian Aylward Shorter views culture as “a transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a pattern capable of development and change, [belonging] to the concept of humanness itself,”[[48]](#endnote-48) theologian Anthony Gittens emphasizes that culture includes the full complement of a people’s values, ethos and worldview.[[49]](#endnote-49)

In light of this wide sense of culture, it is important to note that inculturation differs both from the process of socialization into one’s native culture and the processes of assimilation by cultural minorities or colonized peoples into a dominant or conquering culture. In this way, *inculturation* differs from two other related phenomena: *enculturation* and *acculturation*. Enculturation denotes a process of socialization whereby young children are taught to “operate within a prevalent meaning-making system…[and] requires a social group and a symbolic universe (including language par excellence, but also conventional institutions like art, music and ritual).”[[50]](#endnote-50) By contrast, acculturation focuses not on learning but on un-learning. Acculturation emphasizes the way that people are socialized into a new or secondary culture in such a way that their primary culture falls away. While the history of colonialism suggests that acculturation often happens under duress, as Anthony Gittens notes “*acculturation* can in principle be the result of respectful encounter.”[[51]](#endnote-51) For Catholic theologians, inculturation is at root a term used to talk about, in Gittens’ words, “a true incarnation of the faith,” or in theologian Paulinus Odozor’s description, “the attempt to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ in any human situation.”[[52]](#endnote-52)

In order to differentiate the kind of tradition creation happening in theologies of inculturation from the kind happening in Yearley’s emendation, and to offer some of the tradition specific rationales for comparison that theologies of inculturation reveal, I want to review briefly a couple of debates among contemporary African moral theologians about the meaning, significance and practical strategies for inculturation. I shall confine my examples to two issues: (1) the place of discussions about the relative priority and critical capacity of traditional cultural practices and dominant Christian theological categories in a fully inculturated African theological ethics, and (2) the mutual relation between theologies of inculturation and African liberation theologies.

In a recent critique of Bénézet Bujo’s *Foundations of an African Ethic*, Paulinus Odozor has asked what it would mean to give a balanced assessment of both traditional African cultures (including African Traditional Religions) and the culture of Catholic Christianity. Bujo, for example, had argued that the style of recent Catholic teachings in moral theology, especially in the 1983 revision of the *Code of Canon Law*, the 1992 promulgation of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and in Pope John Paul II’s 1993 encyclical letter, *Veritatis Splendor*, exhibited a highly restrictive view about what constituted appropriate moral concerns and approaches to moral issues. These documents, Bujo said, “simply failed to take heed of the concerns of the non-European churches. Not only its juridical thinking, but its entire theological and ethical categories remain wholly Western.”[[53]](#endnote-53) Central to Bujo’s proposal was an effort to reposition moral decision making away from an exclusive focus on individuals in isolation from their communities’ concerns, toward a more fully deliberative model grounded in the African practice of palaver which brings the community into a back and forth exchange to name and remedy problems arising in the community. Practical moral reasoning, he judged, must take account of culturally specific sources of moral reasoning (including the value judgments made by the past and present community) as well as its community specific forms such as the palaver.

Odozor, also interested in establishing an authentically African basis for ethics within a Catholic Christian framework, offered several critiques of Bujo’s account of traditional Catholic morality. For example, Odozor questioned Bujo’s tendency toward “idealizing Africa’s past and giving insufficient attention to the current structurally negative and damaging elements in those traditions.”[[54]](#endnote-54) While he affirmed Bujo’s assertions about the African focus on the community and family above the individual, its hospitality to others and its “solidarity with family, friends, and kinsfolk,” he went on to say that “it could be argued to the contrary that many traditional African societies do not appear capable of granting or willing to extend to persons beyond their immediate purview the recognition of full personhood and hence the same hospitality and friendship they would show members of their families and clan.”[[55]](#endnote-55) In terms of the deliberative process of palaver, which he too affirms as an expression of “community-oriented African ethics,” Odozor cautioned that the palaver, apart from the strong example of persons of upright character, can easily be manipulated by those who would use it to advance their own, sometimes corrupt, interests.[[56]](#endnote-56) To correct the weaknesses he perceived in Bujo’s approach, Odozor countered that more attention should be paid to how an explicitly Christian understanding of God could be placed into conversation with traditional African understandings of God. Moral theology moves toward a more thoroughly inculturated position when it acknowledges that

“Current cultural practices can harbor significant distortions of a people’s way of life and may need reform and renewal. Yet it is *this* same culture as known and lived by *this* particular people today that harbors or generates the values today’s people hold important and by which they construe reality. Therefore, it is with this culture as carried and index of life here today that we must be in dialogue.”[[57]](#endnote-57)

Here we have an example of the kind of rationales for comparative engagement that arise internal to theological discussions when the fact of cultural diversity is highlighted. What grounds inter-cultural dialogue at the heart of theologies of inculturation is recognition of the shared ambivalence about current cultural realities *and* dominant theological cultures through which the community struggles to live by the Christian message. Odozor suggested that in searching for a philosophical foundation for an African Christian ethic, Bujo was too quick to dismiss the philosophical tradition of natural law thinking which, even within Catholic theology, admits of both authoritarian and more inductive approaches to the discernment of moral norms within cultures.

Another rationale for comparison emerges in discussions about how the Gospel theme of liberation relates to inculturation. Jean-Marc Ela has emphasized that “liberation of the oppressed must be the primary condition for any authentic inculturation of the Christian message.”[[58]](#endnote-58) Interestingly, Bujo echoed a similar point, an anticipation perhaps of Odozor’s critique, when he suggested that “We cannot take pride in the fact that our theology has such a onesided interest in culture that is little concerned with the liberation of the people of God from their misery.”[[59]](#endnote-59) Ela viewed theology as a way of expanding vision in the service of moral sensitivity that arises from the practice of reflecting on the Gospel in a particular social context: “Theology is a labor of deciphering the sense of revelation in the historical context in which we become aware of ourselves and our situation in the world.”[[60]](#endnote-60) In other words, the comparative thinking at work in theologies of inculturation is prompted by a basic human concern for liberation from poverty and political oppression.

The relationship between inculturation and liberation is further complicated by different regional concerns, arising out of the experiences of particular communities.[[61]](#endnote-61) For example, in his study of Catholic ecclesiology in light of Church ministries to the poor and sick in Africa, Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator has suggested that the Gospel theme of liberation demands a twofold critique of culture. On the one hand, “the failure of the church to confront this [pastoral context of suffering] creates an *ecclesial malaise*, an indication that the church has grown out of touch with the concrete reality of life.”[[62]](#endnote-62) The turn to liberation theology emerges from the community’s reflection on the Gospel in light of its suffering. When the dominant ecclesial culture fails to live up to the demands of the Gospel it preaches, the community engages in comparative thinking about how both the community of the Church and the broader cultural community can engage in dialogue to bring about a nearer approximation of the Gospel vision of the good in both communities. The rationale for comparative engagement in this instance would appear to be something akin to moral transparency, where the demands of each culture reflect back the inability of the other to live by its own most deeply held values.

In light of these sample discussions about inculturation, a different sense of tradition-creation comes into view for comparative ethics. Inculturation discussions arise out of the inevitable experience of scrutinizing one’s own dual commitments, to a particular culture and to a particular theological tradition, both of which one sees as, in Paul Griffiths’ phrasing, “comprehensive, incapable of abandonment, and of central importance.”[[63]](#endnote-63) Both a traditional theological framework and a given cultural context communicate truths that are simultaneously deeply personal and universally true, in the sense that even the culturally specific while personally mediated has wide-ranging critical power.

The creative impulse that I have suggested is at work in theologies of inculturation is framed by a commitment to a set of values embodied in a culture but also in the concepts and conversations embodied in a longstanding theological tradition. Yet this creative impulse at the heart of inculturation also leaves room for discovery within commitment, indeed even discovery and valuation in the midst of multiple serious commitments. These theologies of inculturation are comparative exercises in the hearts of persons with multiple commitments to a culture and to a religious tradition, but their forms of comparison explicitly acknowledge calling the community to growth, to change if necessary, and certainly to deeper thought about how the prejudgments and spiritual complacency of its own members prevent the members of that same community from working together to realize a common set of values. The rationales for comparative engagement, namely moral transparency and the mutual correction of cultures in light of certain overlaps in conceptions of the human good, call forth comparisons. Commitment to the traditions in question is assumed, as is the protracted life together through which the comparisons will be tested and their implications realized.

**III. Traditions of Comparison: Families—Religious and Scholarly**

Thus far I have suggested that theologies of inculturation are an explicit and self-consciously tradition-creating form of comparison and therein we might find an important lesson for comparative ethics. But it is certainly not the case that we can or should find a direct correlate in the present work of comparative ethics to the varieties and rationales for comparison that emerge from within religious traditions. What is important, however, is the sort of sensitivity and posture that comparativists take to the traditions they study, particularly when those traditions are not ones that the comparativist finds compelling in a way that would prompt them to become part of that tradition in a more thoroughgoing way.

Here it is helpful to return to the discussion about holism reviewed earlier. I noted that the debate between Little and Twiss, Swearer and Stout revolved around what sense of holism was most suited to comparative ethics. Following Little and Twiss, I suggested that a more continuous holism would be characterized by several features. It would attempt to integrate philosophical and anthropological approaches to comparative ethics in a way that, as accurately as possible, presented the culturally distinctive ways that moral and religious matters appear in traditions. It would also acknowledge that religious traditions often have multiple philosophical impulses (even different philosophical “sub-traditions”) at work in their histories, and so we should resist any forms of philosophical engagement with religious traditions that reduce this complexity, even if we see elements in our own philosophical tradition that seem to have shut down certain avenues of investigation. Finally, we should not shy a way from the continuities between the basic moral and religious questions that ground the traditions we investigate and our own moral and religious questions. Better to be transparent about them, even if we hold them provisionally, than to pretend we do not hold them at all. I believe these features adequately characterize Little and Twiss’ project, and they ought to form a baseline for our own comparative work.

However, I would also suggest that these baseline features are not enough, because we need to take another step in comparative investigations to develop a level of transparency about our own investment in the traditions we study and the extent to which our own work contributes to the ongoing creation and re-creation of those traditions. Lee Yearley provided a helpful first language to think about this problem in his comments on the emendation of the religious ideas of classic traditions. Yet I think it is important to continue to probe the middle ground between Yearley’s preliminary formulation and the kind of tradition-creating comparisons that are happening in religious traditions today. By reviewing Catholic theological reflection on ethics and inculturation, I meant to highlight only one example of what tradition-creating comparison looks like within a tradition and how we might discern the rationales for comparison that emerge within religious traditions. There are undoubtedly many others, and by studying each tradition with an eye toward its internal rationales for comparison we will take an important step toward a productive relationship between comparativists and the traditions they study. How and where might we begin this work?

Although I have argued that it is important for comparativists to be honest about their own rationales for comparison in dialogue with the rationales for comparison emerging from the traditions they study, I do not imagine this will be easy work. It involves a level of risk with respect to the transformative power of what one studies, similar in some ways to the spiritual awakening and regret that Yearley noted can attend comparative study. Perhaps we would be well advised to enter into this work gradually, and begin by asking whether we might first become invested in and accountable to the intellectual histories of our fellow comparativists. If we commit ourselves to understanding each other’s intellectual journeys, which may include both investment in or rejection of elements of the traditions we study, we will be preparing ourselves to enter into the lives of the wider traditions we study. What James Fredericks once outlined as a promising approach to comparative theology, namely inter-religious friendship, might be helpfully reformulated for our context as a journey toward inter-comparative friendships.[[64]](#endnote-64)

The journey toward this level of investment in and accountability toward understanding the projects of other scholars is related, by way of commitment and sensitivity, to the deep understanding we seek of other traditions. This is, I suggest, another way thinking about the holistic impulse of comparative ethics. Following the beautiful imagery provided by Charles Hallisey, perhaps we can think of the sort of holism we seek as a treasuring continuous holism, preserving what we study even as we seek continuities with the questions empowering those traditions and the people who study them.

The image of philosophy “as of a treasurer” reminds us that our responsibilities are not only to ourselves, but to past and future generations, and it also reminds us that these responsibilities impress on us certain expectations for how we should approach our expanding intellectual inheritance. As we have learned with respect to those Western philosophical traditions which we already call “our own,” we have a responsibility to listen and to ‘continue the conversation’ of tradition, even when it leaves us confused and even when we are confident that our reflections have “discovered” conceptual inadequacies within it. Our responsibility is to preserve what we use—and to preserve in the process of use—without making the resources of a culturally distant tradition “grist for our mill.”[[65]](#endnote-65)

To “‘continue the conversation’ of tradition,” I submit, is part of what scholars of comparative ethics can and should do, but it is important to recognize that there are two deeply related “traditions” in play: the religious traditions studied and the traditions of the comparativists that study them. Yet to “preserve in the process of use” suggests that we do not change what we use as we use it. However, both traditions and the scholarship about them are both preservative and creative. We must consider again the rationales for our work, our methodological choices, and how each of these emerges from a confluence of the scholar’s own subjective judgments but also the traditions under examination. From time to time, we all must catch ourselves when we succumb to the endless proliferation of the “interesting.” Yet we should be equally compelled to ask, even if we are not part of the communities we study, why academic comparisons are put forth and what effect they are likely to have on those communities. The comparativist must take some responsibility for this question amidst their scholarly family’s own negotiations.

1. The author would like to thank the members of the comparative ethics working group (especially this volume’s editors), in our meetings at the CSWR at Harvard University and at Indiana University, as well as Paulinus Odozor and Richard Rosengarten, for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this chapter. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The word “tradition” is, admittedly, a loaded term in religious (especially comparative) ethics. In what follows, I do not specify a definition of tradition although I do think it helpful to establish certain parameters. With certain cautions, I would begin with Alasdair MacIntyre’s hypothesis that “A tradition is an argument extended through time in which certain fundamental agreements are defined and redefined in terms of two kinds of conflict: those with critics and enemies external to the tradition who reject all or at least key parts of those fundamental agreements, and those internal, interpretive debates through which the meaning and rationale of the fundamental agreements come to be expressed and by whose progress a tradition is constituted.” See Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 11. This formulation of “tradition” is helpful to a certain extent in thinking about the meaning of religion and culture within a tradition, although MacIntyre’s own sense of his Catholic Christian tradition is both historically and philosophically expansive yet also extremely narrow in terms of the global variety of Catholic cultures and even the ritual (we would say liturgical) life of that community through history. For a critique of MacIntyre as narrowly Catholic, see David A. Clairmont, “Moral Disagreement and Inter-religious Conversation: The Penitential Pace of Understanding” in *Intractable Disputes about the Natural Law: Alasdair MacIntyre and Critics*, Lawrence S. Cunningham, ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 97-129. This critique roughly parallels Stout’s adoption of Okin’s critique of MacIntyre, emphasizing the difference between tradition as historical conversation about a conception of the good and the political construction of such conversations by authorities which leave out certain parties and their goods; see Jeffrey Stout, “Commitments and Traditions in the Study of Religious Ethics,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 25.3 (1998) Suppl., 135-6. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. For a discussion of the status of classics, including classic religious texts, see David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Francis X. Clooney, S.J., *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 10. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. By acknowledging the strong continuity of present conversations with earlier concerns in the field, I take my analysis to be broadly in line with two recent perspectives on the place of ethnography in comparative ethics: Thomas A. Lewis, “Ethnography, Anthropology, and Comparative Religious Ethics: Or Ethnography and the Comparative Religious Ethics Local,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 38.3 (2010), 395-403; and John Kelsay, “Response to Papers for ‘Ethnography, Anthropology, and Comparative Religious Ethics’ Focus,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 38.3 (2010), 485-93. What Lewis suggests of recent ethnographies, that they “highlight a plurality of views even within one so-called tradition,” but also offer “an emphatic rejection of looking only at elites,” echoes my own concern about the presence of debates in traditions that are linked to multiple rather than single lines of self-reflection in traditions. (399) Similarly, Kelsay’s advice that comparativists should continue to reflect on “Weber’s problematic—namely, what does it mean for human beings to exercise moral, political, and other responsibilities in a world increasingly dominated by instrumental rationality,” echoes a similar process I see occurring within traditions—especially as they assess complementary and conflicting values in traditional cultures, modern society, and longstanding but culturally external religious traditions. (492) [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. David Little, “Max Weber and the Comparative Study of Religious Ethics,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 2.2 (1974), 34. Although I am not quite so suspicious of the influence of Foucault on recent comparative ethics as he, I have in preparing this essay, tried to follow John Kelsay’s counsel that comparativists return to this early article by David Little, and I have tried to draw appropriate analogies between his concerns and my comparative theological program in light of it. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Recent theological discourse has examined the notion of multiple audiences or publics to whom theological discourse is directed. At issue especially is whether theological discourse is always and only directed toward the public of the religious community in which it was produced. For a statement of theology as a discourse directed to the religious community, the academy and the wider society, see David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. XXX—internal reference (Cline, p.1): My focus on religion and culture seems related to concerns raised by Erin Cline in her essay for this volume. Cline identifies three “methodological challenges” to comparative ethics which she treats under the headings “thematic issues,” “interpretive issues,” and “procedural issues,” using these to chart instances where either (a) comparative subjects are not portrayed with sufficient accuracy or (b) there is room for disagreement about conclusions among scholars in ways that do not undermine the comparisons themselves. I am asking a related question, namely how it is that we can use the relationship between religion and culture to (a) spot instances where one particular discussion about method in the early years of the field has too strongly conditioned the field’s present constitution and (b) speak about the proper relationship between the scholar to traditions that scholar studies. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. David Little and Sumner B. Twiss, *Comparative Religious Ethics: A New Method* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978) [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid., p. ix, 13 [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. John Ladd, *The Structure of a Moral Code: A Philosophical Analysis of Ethical Discourse Applied to the Ethics of the Navaho Indians* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957), 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid. 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid. 35. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. David Little and Sumner B. Twiss, *Comparative Religious Ethics: A New Method* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), 18-9. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid., 125. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid., 251. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid., 54. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid., 55. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid., 55. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. This feature of Little and Twiss’s analysis is acutely present in their analysis of the Navaho notion of *k’é*, which they describe both as a basic moral norm, namely “moral harmony,” but also in terms of “moral virtues and traits of character” which they note are the ways in which “most of the ethnographic data about Navaho morality are expressed.” (133) [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. In responding to critiques of their book, David Little characterized Swearer and Stout as two varieties of holism, which differed both from his and his co-author’s approach but also from the “grand-theories” of some early social scientific studies of religion and of the “apples-and-oranges” approach of some early theological studies of religions. See David Little, “The Present State of the Comparative Study of Religious Ethics,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 9.2 (1981), 210-27. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Donald K. Swearer, “Nirvana, no-self, and comparative religious ethics,” *Religious Studies Review* 6.4 (1980), 306. For example, Swearer noted that “Historians of religion charge that the deductive nature of the interpretation cannot adequately account for the multivalent and multidimensional nature of a religious system. Area specialists make a similar kind of charge but from an even broader cultural and historical perspective, arguing that such an approach inevitably distorts historical particularity and cultural uniqueness. Furthermore, students of religion who find the locus of religion in categories like "faith" or "religious experience" are troubled by the insistence on definitional exactness as an a priori or necessary condition of the enterprise, agreeing with Weber that such definition—"if attempted at all"—should come at the end rather than the beginning.” (302) [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Stout’s critiques of Little and Twiss were published and republished in a series of essays: first in Jeffrey Stout, “Weber’s Progeny, Once Removed,” *Religious Studies Review* 6.4 (1980), 289-295 [later republished slightly revised in Jeffrey Stout, *The Flight from Authority: Religion, Morality and the Quest for Autonomy* (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 201-227]; continued in Jeffery Stout, “Holism and Comparative Ethics: A Response to Little,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 11.2 (1983), 301-316. Just as Stout’s critique of Little and Twiss sought to destabilize their claims to revive aspects of a Weberian project hoping for some objectivity and normative detachment from the material studies, Stout offered a similar critique of Alasdair MacIntyre and John Milbank for offering strategic distortions and decontextualizations of early and late modern thinkers to maintain narratives about the death of the liberal project and the coherence of religious traditions. See his “Commitments and Traditions in the Study of Religious Ethics,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 25.3 (1998) Suppl, 23-56. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Stout presented his critiques in terms of whether one could adopt certain ideas in constructing a comparative method without always necessarily accounting for subsequent critiques of those ideas issued from within the contexts in which those ideas arose. So following a broadly Weberian program that considered a more or less objective, value free cultural inquiry possible, or employing particular philosophical notions like “explication” and “rational reconstruction,” was not an appropriate comparative method for religious ethics because it did not account for longstanding critiques of a value free science or of the stability of meaning in concepts or in texts. To examine Stout’s use of developments in the philosophy of language as a chastening tool for the ambitions (and covert theological motivations) of religious ethics, see his “Metaethics and the Death of Meaning: Adams’ Tantalizing Closing” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 6.1 (1978), and “What is the Meaning of a Text?” *New Literary History* 14.1 (1982), 1-12. Although it is outside the scope of this paper to develop the suggestion further, I want to suggest that many of the troubles that comparative ethics now faces, in terms of its coherence as a discipline as well its apparent inability to render moral judgments that issue from the comparative heart of is projects, might be addressed if we thought about the philosophical underpinnings (indeed the operative histories of philosophy) of the field. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. “The smaller the unit of comparison, according to holism, the greater the likelihood of distortive abstraction. Moral principles, for example, cannot be understood in abstraction from the network of more specific moral judgments in which they are embedded, the metaphysical presuppositions of those who espouse them, or the social and intellectual problems to which they offer possible solutions. A moral code cannot be usefully reduced to its most general principles for the purposes of comparison. Even the smallest intelligible unit of comparison is likely to be a highly complicated slice of social and intellectual history.” “Holism and Comparative Ethics” (313) [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. I am greatly indebted to Brian Hamilton for teaching me how best to think about Stout’s contribution and challenge to comparative theology and interreligious dialogue in terms of two senses of the pragmatic justification of moral claims. One can appreciate the pragmatic movement inherent in interreligious dialogue about moral matters without accepting that interreligious dialogue (that is, the move to engage in interreligious conversion) is best justified on pragmatic grounds. Moreover, Hamilton has reminded me that Stout is not so indissolubly wedded to pragmatic justification as many a comparativist now reads him, and this should give us at least initial reason to challenge his rationales for comparison with rationales emerging within the religious traditions themselves. As Stout writes, “Either this account [a pragmatist account of normativity] stands up to critical scrutiny or it does not. While my commitment to it goes back to my graduate school days (when Gilbert Harman, Richard Rorty, Victor Preller, Robert Brandom, Henry Levinson, Cornel West, and I were all reading Sellars in the same town, and I was simultaneously studying Hegel with David Hoy), that commitment is actually quite tentative. It does not matter to me in the way that Emersonian virtues and democratic commitments do. It is just the theory of normative discourse that strikes me at this point as the most plausible. I am actively considering other theories of normative discourse, and can imagine myself coming to prefer a different one. I neither think of fidelity to Hegel and Sellars as a virtue, nor care much at all about whether I end up defending something called pragmatism. It is true, however, that the order in which one comes across ideas has an impact not only on what one does believe, but also on what one ought to believe. I did come across these ideas at a formative stage in my development. So if I give them up, it will be because some alternative theory comes to seem clearly superior to the view I already hold.” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 33.4 (2005), 722–3. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. According to Stout, semantic holism indicates “the view that sharp distinctions between the analytic and the synthetic, theory and observation, and fact and value cannot be justified, and that the semantic interpretation of an expression therefore depends upon the other expressions (of various types) we make it consort with;” epistemological holism/contextualism indicates the view that “in order to know or doubt the truth of an interpreted sentence one must know a great deal about a lot of different things beyond that sentence, and that epistemic justification is therefore a matter of relations to dialogical context;” hermeneutical holism suggest that “once cannot abstract sentences (or the propositional attitudes they are used to express) from the linguistic and ideological context in which they appear without rendering them unintelligible, and that students of culture therefore ought not to do so.” (310) [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Jeffrey Stout, “Holism and Comparative Ethics,” 309 [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. On this point, compare Stout’s view of the historical events prompting changes in use of moral terms presented in *The Flight from Authority* (1981) with the events conditioning his recent reflections in *Democracy and Tradition* (2005) and *Blessed Are the Organized* (2010). [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. For a parallel analysis of the “destabilization of normative commitments” among anthropologists turning to the study of ethics, see Lewis 2010, 400. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Jeffrey Stout, “Weber’s Progeny, Once Removed,” *Religious Studies Review* 6.4 (1980), 293. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. For the characterization of “waves” of scholarship in comparative ethics, see Elizabeth M. Bucar, “Methodological Invention as a Constructive Project: Exploring the Production of Ethical Knowledge through the Interaction of Discursive Knowledge,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 36.3 (2008), 355-73. For an important exception to this absence, see Thomas A. Lewis, “Frames of Comparison: Anthropology and Inheriting Traditional Practices,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 33.2 (2005), 225-53. Although Lewis has limited his engagements in explicit inter-religious comparisons, his attempts to probe a philosophical system (Hegel) for its significance for comparative method are precisely the sort of advances that may bring some clarity to this issue. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. See Paul J. Griffiths, “Denaturalizing Discourse: Ābhidhrmikas, Propositionalists, and the Comparative Philosophy of Religion,” in *Myth and Philosophy*, Frank E. Reynolds and David Tracy, eds. (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990), 57-91. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. See Frank E. Reynolds, “Four Modes of Theravada Action.” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 7.1 (1979): 12-26; and Frank E. Reynolds, “Multiple Cosmogonies and Ethics: The Case of Theravāda Buddhism.” In *Cosmogony and Ethical Order: New Studies in Comparative Ethics*, Robin W. Lovin and Frank E. Reynolds, eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985) [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. See especially the two focal issues of the *Journal of Religious Ethics* on “Anthropos and Ethics: Categories of Inquiry and Procedures of Comparison,” 33.2 (2005); and “Focus on Ethnography, Anthropology, and Comparative Religious Ethics,” 38.3 (2010). [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Lee H. Yearley, “Selves, Virtues, Odd Genres, and Alien Guides: An Approach to Religious Ethics.” *Journal of Religious Ethics* *25th Anniversary Supplement* 25.3 (1998), p. 129. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Ibid., p. 129. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Lee H. Yearley, “Ideas of Ethical Excellence,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Religious Ethics*, William Schweiker, ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), p. 51. Although he does not explicitly acknowledge this, the criteria for emendation accountable to both a religious tradition and “common human experience” bear a remarkable resemblance to those enunciated by David Tracy’s theological revisionist method of “critical correlation.” See David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1975), p. 43-63. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Lee H. Yearley, “Selves, Virtues, Odd Genres, and Alien Guides,” 128. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. See David A. Clairmont, “Persons as Religious Classics: Comparative Ethics and the Theology of Bridge Concepts,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78.3 (2010), 687-720. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. See Paulinus Odozor, “Classical Catholic Moral Theology and the World Church: Some Suggestions on How to Move Forward,” *Louvain Studies* 30 (2005), p. 276-298. See also James F. Keenan, ed. *Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church: The Plenary Papers from the First Cross-cultural Conference in Catholic Theological Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2007) [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Pope John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, encyclical letter promulgated March 25, 1995; par. 12 [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, 42. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1951), 39. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. See Richard B. Miller, “On Making a Cultural Turn in Religious Ethics,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 33.3 (2005), 409-10. For a similar focus on everyday practices as a resources for comparative ethics, see [XXX: citation to Lewis and Kao articles in this volume] [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. Ibid., 416. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. For example, Anthony Gittens cites both Tylor’s late 19th century definition from *Primitive Culture*—“that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society”—and Geertz’s late 20th century definition from *The Interpretation of Cultures*—“a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which human beings communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about, and their attitudes towards, life.” See Anthony J. Gittens, “Beyond Liturgical Inculturation: Transforming the Deep Structures of Faith,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 69 (2004), 47-72. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. Aylward Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1999), p. 4-5; cited in Gittens, 48. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. Anthony J. Gittens, “Beyond Liturgical Inculturation: Transforming the Deep Structures of Faith,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 69 (2004), 48. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. See Gittens, 49. See also Paulinus Ikechukwu Odozor, “An African Moral Theology of Inculturation: Methodological Considerations,” *Theological Studies* 69 (2008), 583-609. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. Bénézet Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethic: Beyond the Universal Claims of Western Morality*, Brian McNeil, trans. (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2001), 73. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. Paulinus Ikechukwu Odozor, “An African Moral Theology of Inculturation: Methodological Considerations,” *Theological Studies* 69 (2008), 594. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. Ibid. From this initial claim, Odozor offers examples of African complicity in the slave trade and the “ethnic strifes that have become a hallmark of the modern African world.” (595) [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. Ibid., 595-6. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. Ibid., 605. [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. Jean-Marc Ela, *My Faith as an African*, John Pairman Brown and Susan Perry, trans. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), vi. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. Bénézet Bujo, *African Christian Morality at the Age of Inculturation* (Nairobi: St. Paul Publications—African, 1990), p.126 (cited in Diane B. Stinton, *Jesus of Africa: Voices of Contemporary African Christology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 50). [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. Jean-Marc Ela, *African Cry*, Robert R. Barr, trans. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986), 29. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. See Emmanuel Martey, *African Theology: Inculturation and Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993). Martey offers the helpful summary of the theological geography of liberation movements in sub-Saharan Africa: “[T]he colonial legacy has divided sub-Saharan Africa into at least six fragments: anglophone Africa, francophone Africa, Portuguese Africa, Belgian Africa, Spanish Africa and apartheid South Africa. Of these, anglophone and francophone Africa and South Africa form the three major zones where theological activity has been the most intense…while in independent Africa the *Negritude movement* in francophone Africa and *African personality* in anglophone Africa contributed significantly to the emergence of African theology of indiginization (or inculturation), in apartheid South Africa, the Black consciousness movement contributed immensely to the emergence of Black theology of liberation.” (1) [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, *From Crisis to Kairos: The Mission of the Church in the Time of HIV/AIDS, Refugees and Poverty* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2005), 69. [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. Paul J. Griffiths, *Problems of Religious Diversity* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 7 [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
64. James L. Fredericks, “Interreligious Friendship: A New Theological Virtue,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 35.2 (1998), 159-174. [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
65. Charles Hallisey, “In Defense of Rather Fragile and Local Achievement: Reflections on the Work of Gurulugomi” in Frank E. Reynolds’ and David Tracy, eds. *Religion and Practical Reason: New Essays in the Comparative Philosophy of Religions* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1994), 150. [↑](#endnote-ref-65)