

Doing Christian Ethics from the Margins

Third Edition

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Prefaces and Acknowledgments

Preface to the 2024 edition

People change. So do academicians. I am no different. Scholars holding the same views professed twenty years earlier probably have not grown, refusing to engage the challenges arising within their field. What I assumed to be relatively true (lowercase “t”) twenty years ago now seems more ambiguous. Concepts I embraced with confidence back then now seem to me naïve, if not somewhat cringeworthy. I find I know less now than I did back then, I am less sure of my opinions, and I hold greater doubts. And surely, I am less hopeful about the future. This is not necessarily a bad thing. The hubris of my conclusions during my early academic career have given way to a more nuanced understanding of reality. In the rewritten conclusion to this edition, you will notice I bring my personal thoughts into greater conversation with this book, more so than in the two previous editions.

But one method has remained constant in my thoughts: the epistemological privilege of the marginalized. Their pain and their suffering continue to inform a perspective that I believe continues to hold a greater grasp of reality than those who are more privileged by power and profit. Because my ethical analysis remains rooted at the margins, my overall conclusion—even as my views shift and change—remains grounded in a certainty that they are closer to reality. This is not to argue that those on the margins are smarter or holier; it is a recognition that, to survive, they must be fluid in understanding the ethical perspectives of those claiming morality but nonetheless remain complicit with oppressive and repressive social structures.

The book you hold is the product of almost two decades of thoughts concerning the same issues. What I find amazing is that we continue to wrestle with these issues, at times making little progress. As I bring this third edition to its conclusion, the reader will benefit by seeing how an issue, first explored in 2004, has morphed over twenty years. Updating concepts by paying close attention to the now reveals a historical trajectory that was first explored shortly after the start of a new millennium. But also, if close attention is paid, the astute reader will also notice a change in the author.

Acknowledgments for the 2024 Edition

For almost twenty years, since obtaining my doctorate, I have been doing Christian ethics from the margins. Two decades of seeking to hear the testimonies of the disenfranchised, the dispossessed, and the disinherited have taught me that we live in a more economically oppressed world today than when I first began to conduct research. We also live in a more racist and more sexist world. If proof ever existed that the enlightened concept of history's progression was a myth accepted as true through blind faith, it is evident in the lives of those living on the margins of society. The wars we assumed were winding down in the last edition continued for a second decade. A newly minted father who joined the armed forces after 9/11 as an expression of patriotism was joined on the battlefield by their child. The postracial naiveté many believed arrived with the election of the first Black president gave way to a whitelash as hate groups proliferated. A global pandemic not seen since the 1918 Spanish Flu [*sic*] has brought the global economy to a standstill. As a nation, we fell into the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression, dwarfing the pain caused by the 2008 Great Recession. Unsurprisingly, US citizens of color were disproportionately dying from the virus when compared to their white counterparts and feeling the brunt of the economic devastation. We experienced four years of a presidential administration that exploited racist tropes to consolidate power, and when the 2020 election was lost, the president instigated an insurrection. His followers stormed the Capitol to undo the electoral vote of the people.

In the past decade, the world radically changed. These changes were so profound that the first two editions have become obsolete. As I write this new edition, I am cognizant of the danger of allowing the principal-agent for many of these monumental shifts, Donald Trump, to suck up all the book's oxygen. Although it can be difficult to remember, he is but a symptom of generational institutionalized social structures—the sneeze of a cold, the pus of a wound. I kept the focus on the structures of oppression and not any singular person.

I am deeply grateful for the trust Orbis Books has placed in me to do this rewrite. I am also thankful for my research assistants, Rudy Reyes and Hesron Sihombing, who spent a year tracking documented sources so that my writing task could be easier to accomplish. A special thanks is also due to Leslie Diane Poston for proofreading the manuscript. The children whom I acknowledged in the first edition, who were recent college graduates in the second edition, are now young adults (one of which made me an *abuelo*), struggling to survive in an economy that has provided them with fewer opportunities than those considered baby boomers. And like always,

a special thanks to my wife (who is now pursuing her own PhD) with whom we debate the ethical issues arising in the daily news each morning as we drink *café con leche* together.

Preface to the 2014 Edition

My students and I were sitting on a dirt-floor hut in a squatter village on the outskirts of Cuernavaca, Mexico. Joining me were mostly white, economically privileged students who sought to learn about God from the poor. Our “teacher” that day was an illiterate *mestiza* who was patiently answering our questions (with me serving as translator). We asked who God is to her. Who is Jesus Christ? Who is the Virgin Mary? Her answers, theologically speaking, were frightful. They were a mixture of superstition and popular Catholicism. It soon became clear she lacked orthodoxy—correct doctrine. Then her barefooted boy (about eleven years old) entered the one-room hut with a few pesos earned selling Chiclets to tourists. As she collected the money, she placed one peso aside. I asked her what that was for. She replied that it was for the poor. At that moment, the orthopraxis, correct action, of this poor woman taught my students (and me) more about the essence of Divinity than all of the academic books we had read. Witnessing the giving of the “widow’s mite” was more effective than any lecture I could have possibly given.

When those who have so little *do* their faith by providing for those who have even less, those of us privileged by class should be profoundly humbled. It is the privileged who see the oppressed and do nothing that are the ones that do not know God. I may have had the educational training to tease apart the inconsistencies in this woman’s beliefs, but she knew far more about God than I did. This is not a romanticization of the poor, for surely there is nothing romantic about poverty. Rather, it is a theological truth that I learned directly from this poor woman’s actions.

When we all get to heaven, we will discover how wrong we all were. No group has a monopoly on truth. So in a sense, orthodoxy—correct belief—is not that important. What should take precedence is orthopraxis—correct action. For this reason, academics who do ethics from the margins are scholar-activists. Perceiving great theoretical thoughts about the Divine is less important than doing the works of love as called for by the Divine.

The poor of Cuernavaca, and elsewhere throughout the world, bring our privileged suppositions into conversation with those who many consider devoid of something to offer the intellectual dialogue. Only by being scholar-activists can my students and I contribute toward the struggle against oppression that has become institutionalized. The praxis of dealing

with oppressive structures within dispossessed communities is more crucial than books published by the “experts,” including the book you hold in your hands. No doubt, such a methodology will usually anger those accustomed to their power and privilege; still, doing ethics from the margins of society must be done if any one of us wishes to be faithful to what we claim, as Christians, to believe.

Since publishing this book a decade ago, my resolve that a closer understanding of the Divine can only be attained by listening carefully to those on the margins has only been strengthened. In all the books I have ever written, in all the classes I have ever taught, in all the lectures I have ever given, the wisdom expressed has never been something I produced while sitting in my ivy tower. Whether it be in the squatter villages of Cuernavaca, walking the migrant trails taken by the undocumented entering the United States, or working beside poor rural rice farmers in Indonesia—everything I hold true I learned from them. This book is a product of the margins.

Acknowledgments for the 2014 Edition

During an academic lecture, a colleague approached me and asked when I was planning to update my book *Doing Christian Ethics from the Margins*. Frankly, I really had not given it much thought until then. The book was being used in many ethics classes and was selling well, but it was very outdated. Since it was written, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq had begun winding down. The Supreme Court made decisions in campaign financing and affirmative action. The country elected its first biracial president. The Great Recession of 2008 hit, devastating the middle class. Much has changed, except the formula that the many are sinking in greater want so that the few can continue to enjoy their excess. Yes, it was time to update the book.

Since the first edition a decade ago, I left (or better yet, was forced out of) Holland, Michigan, when I began to advocate for LGBTQ+ civil rights. Standing with the oppressed can at times be costly. The children whom I acknowledged in the first edition, Victoria and Vincent, are now college graduates starting out in a world with fewer opportunities available than in the past. For their sakes, and the sake of this new generation, this book attempts to ask why.

Finding the latest statistics and updated facts was not an easy task. It would never have occurred without the help of a small cadre of research assistants, specifically Patrick Bowen, Rebecca Chabot, and Sarah Neeley. A special thanks to Samuel (Slam) Trujillo, who was my assistant on this project for over a year. And yes, my wife, Deb, continues to be my moral compass as we discuss (debate?) a multitude of ethical issues.

Preface to the 2004 Edition

The (class)room is appropriately named, for it is indeed a room of class—a room where students learn the class they belong to and the power and privilege that comes with that class.¹ The fact that some students are able to pay sufficient money to attend particular rooms of class located on prestigious campuses indicates that they will have certain opportunities that are denied to those of lower economic classes, those who are more often than not students of color residing on the margins of society.

Our educational system is far from being objective or neutral, and students who attend classrooms, from community colleges to highly selective universities, can either be conditioned to accept the present system of social structures or seek liberation from it. All too often, the educational system serves to normalize these power structures as legitimate. The task of educators, specifically those who call themselves ethicists, is to cultivate students' ability to find their own voices by creating an environment in which individual and collective consciousness-raising can occur.

As an ethicist unapologetically grounded in a Latino/a social context, I create an environment within the (class)room that attempts to perceive the will of the Divine from within the social location of marginalized people—that is, those who are not usually able to participate in the (class)room where I teach. Such a process analyzes their reality, a reality tied to an ethical perspective that demands a sociopolitical response to oppression. In this way a relationship can develop between intellectuals aware of the structural crises faced by people of color and the disenfranchised in the United States.

Nevertheless, the danger facing liberative scholars is that they can become an intellectual elite disconnected from the everyday struggles of the marginalized and have little or no impact upon the churches in disenfranchised communities. Ethicists from the margins attempting to overcome this disconnect advocate connecting the work done by Christian ministers serving disenfranchised communities with the academic work done by faculty and students in our colleges and universities. These ministers and scholars attempt to learn from the disenfranchised while serving them as organic intellectuals (to borrow a term from Antonio Gramsci), that is, intellectuals grounded in the social reality of the marginalized, and acting in the consciousness-raising process of the faith community.

The pedagogy I employ in my (class)room, and will attempt to unfold in this book, seeks to open Christian ethics to the rich diversity

¹ I am indebted to one of my mentors, John Raines, who constantly reminded me of this fact during my doctoral studies.

found among those who are usually excluded—those who are multiracial and multicultural people. In my “room of class” I attempt to construct a collaborative ethics through studying and reflecting on the lives and circumstances of marginalized people. This is not to make students aware of some quaint or exotic perspective of those who are disenfranchised; rather, it is to help them realize that because the gospel message was first proclaimed in the colonized spaces of Judea, those who reside in these marginalized spaces—then and now—hold the key to properly interpreting this message. In this way the salvation of the usually eurocentric-dominant culture depends on hearing what is proclaimed by those from the margins.

This approach demands a response to injustice and oppression. By forcing my students to occupy an uncomfortable space, I can provide them with a unique outlook, with a view I believe enhances more traditional learning. I try to bring their lifetime of experiences and knowledge into conversation with people whose lives and experiences may be quite different from theirs, people who may often be thought of as having little to contribute to the educational process.

This pedagogy, however, is useless if it is restricted solely to the (class) room. The liberating ethical praxis I advocate is pertinent to the larger community as well. For example, the community in which my school is located, called Holland, was settled by the Dutch in the early 1800s. Located on Lake Michigan, Holland features wooden shoe factories, a windmill imported from the Netherlands, and an annual May festival called Tulip Time that attracts more than one hundred thousand visitors to celebrate Holland’s Dutch heritage.

But Holland is also a town where all people are not Dutch. On the underside of Holland, we discover Hispanics who make up approximately 22.2 percent of the overall population. (If those who are undocumented were counted, the numbers would hover at 30 percent.) In addition, 3.5 percent of the population is Asian and 2.3 percent Black. Despite these demographics, those who live on the margins of Holland are seldom seen walking or shopping on Eighth Street, the main business center of the city. This is often true even if they live a few blocks away.

Holland is a town where many from the dominant culture may wish to live in a more just and equitable society, but they also find themselves trapped within social structures created long ago (and some more recently) to protect their privilege by masking racism and classism. Consequently, those who are oppressed by these structures, along with those who benefit, are in need of liberation, another word for salvation.

To bring about liberation as salvation, Christianity must become a way of life rather than just a doctrinal belief. If simple belief is all that

is required for salvation, then complicity with structures that perpetuate oppression is inconsequential to the Christian life. Besides, do not the demons themselves believe Jesus Christ is Lord of all (Jas. 2:19)? The perspectives of Christian liberative ethicists are crucial to help establish a more just society. Faculty and students alike can contribute to the struggle against oppression that has often become institutionalized. For this reason, my role as an ethicist must include participation in both a faith community and the overall society. What I do—my praxis—is more crucial than any book I might write. Most Christian ethicists working from a liberation framework write or teach to give voice to the voiceless, to shout from the mountaintop that which is commonly heard among disenfranchised people, to put into words what the marginalized are feeling and doing. No doubt, such writing may anger or alienate those who view their power and privilege as birthrights; nonetheless, perspectives from the margins must be voiced to bring about repentance for those who participate in injustice through their privilege, and to bring about salvation for those who suffer from injustices.

As can be imagined, this type of pedagogy does not come easily in a conservative religious and political environment like Holland, Michigan. It might be wiser to simply conform to the dominant culture and remain silent in the face of racism, classism, sexism, and heterosexism. There is a tremendous temptation to turn my back on the oppression that surrounds me. But it seems my scholarship has been influenced by Don Quixote, and like Don Quixote, I feel the need to charge the windmills of Holland. But in a world that normalizes oppression—our world today—maybe some Don Quixotes can bring hope when there is none as they set out on a path that establishes a justice-based ethics by taking on the foes of power and privilege.

Acknowledgments for the 2004 Edition

Even Don Quixote had his Sancho. Likewise, this book is a reality because of the many who labored with me to bring it to fruition. It would be a travesty to take full credit for what appears on these pages. Many of the ideas and insights for this book took shape in a senior-level class I taught at Hope College by the same name, *Doing Christian Ethics from the Margins*. Although the class was composed of approximately twenty students (all Anglo students, save one) with most sharing in middle- and upper-class privilege, these students were committed to seeking justice. They seriously undertook the quite difficult task of reflecting upon ethical case studies by seeking the voices of those who are usually disenfranchised by prevailing social structures. I give my deep-felt thanks to these students. Specifically,

I wish to highlight three of them: Dustin Janes, Lauren Hinkle, and Phil Johnson. They worked with me for an additional semester as research assistants, spending countless hours gathering and organizing data.

Thanks to a McGregor Fund grant offered through Hope College, Phil Johnson was able to continue assisting me with this project through the summer months. I am also indebted to librarian Anthony Guardado at Hope College, who worked with us in locating hard-to-find sources. I also greatly appreciate the Religion Department at Hope College, whose faculty set up a colloquium to read early versions of this manuscript and provided valuable feedback. In addition, I am grateful to John Raines and Allan Verhey, who carefully read sections of the manuscript and provided much constructive criticism. Any success this book has is due to their wise counsel. I continue to be indebted to Jonathan Schakel for his faithfulness in proofreading my text, and to my editor Susan Perry, who was always ready to prod me toward excellence. As always, I owe eternal gratitude to my children, Vincent and Victoria, and my soul-mate Deborah, my moral compass who continues to be the source of my strength.