Teaching Christian Character and Ethics to Generation Z

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One of my students in a Basics in Christian Ethics course once raised a serious concern. He said, "I feel intimidated in this class when we are discussing about smoking. I know that smoking is ethically wrong and is not good for my health and the health of people around me. I do really try to quit smoking, but I haven't succeeded yet. When this class keeps discussing how bad smoking is, I feel intimidated." His statement was shocking for me as a teacher, since I had never imagined he would bluntly state his concern that way. It shows that teaching ethics has a distinctive nature as compared to teaching other subjects: teaching ethics is not only about transferring cognitive knowledge from teacher to students, it is also about transforming the conative[1] aspect of the students, that is, growing the wisdom that enables them to have certain attitudes, behaviors, actions, and so forth. Indeed, it is about the formation of character.

Context of Duta Wacana Christian University
Before I go further in explaining the Basics in Christian Ethics course that I teach in the Faculty of Theology at Duta Wacana Christian University (DWCU) in Jogjakarta, I should offer some background about my students and the university. Unlike in North America, where students can enroll in seminary only after completing a bachelor's degree, in Indonesia they may begin seminary study right after graduating from high school. Thus, the first stage of seminary study is basically equivalent to undergraduate study in the North American educational system. The seminary study is required of

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[1] My use of the terms "conative" and "conation" comes from Thomas Groome, *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry: The Way of Shared Praxis* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991), and denotes the "fundamental eros that moves us to realize our own 'being' in relationship with others and the world. This 'will to being' prompts us to exercise our sensate, cognitive, affective, and volitional capacities … to place and maintain ourselves as agent-subjects in relationship." Christian conation, Groome further says, refers to the "'character' to realize the believing, trusting, and doing that is constitutive of lived Christian faith in the world," 29-30.

candidates for ordination in most church synods,[2] and can be completed in four to five years.

DWCU was founded in 1906 as a school of Christian religion with the purpose of equipping and preparing indigenous Javanese who were expected to serve as pastoral assistants for Dutch pastors after the completion of their training.[3] The Christian[4] denominational tradition behind this school was *Gereformeerd* Calvinist. In 1962 it merged with another Christian school, whose denominational background was *Hervormd* Calvinist, to establish Duta Wacana Graduate School of Theology.[5] Even though they both came from the Calvinist tradition, they represent two different kinds of Calvinism. The theological gap between the two denominations is similar to that between the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church in North America before they merged.

Several years later, other synods, one of them Mennonite (*GITJ*—Javanese Christian Church of Indonesia), also joined in, bringing the number of synods backing the seminary to five. Seven other synods, including yet another Mennonite synod (*GKMI*—Muria Christian Church of Indonesia), then joined the group to form a total of twelve synods that are the collective owners of this academic community. In 1985 the seminary became a university.

Now there are 15 study programs in the university spread across seven departments, including Faculties of Theology, Business, Architecture and Design, Biotechnology, Information Technology, Medicine, and Language Studies. A Faculty of Dentistry is on the way. The Faculty of Theology offers Bachelors, Masters, and Doctoral programs. The Faculties of Business and

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[2] The term "synod" refers to the national union of churches from a particular denomination that has a common history, and is established by the consent of those churches to organize themselves together under one legal body. The Mennonite denomination in Indonesia, for instance, is distinguished into three synods; each has its own history, independent from the others.

[3] Indonesia was at that time under Dutch rule.

[4] In Indonesia, "Christian" refers to Protestants as distinct from Catholics.

[5] In 2004 the Dutch Reformed Church (Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk, or NHK) and the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (Gereformeerde Kerk in Nederland, or GKN) merged into the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (Protestantse Kerk in Nederland, or PKN). Long before these two Calvinist denominations officially merged, their seminaries in Indonesia had merged in 1962.

Architecture and Design offer Bachelors and Masters programs. Other departments offer Bachelors programs only. The student body consists of about 3,800 students, nearly 500 of whom study in the theology department at all levels.

Format of the Basics in Christian Ethics Course
Intended for undergraduates in their third semester, Basics in Christian Ethics is an obligatory course in the Faculty of Theology. The aim is to introduce basic understandings of ethics and some approaches in Christian ethics, with the emphasis on character ethics.[6] My own intention is to bring students to a realization that when we talk about Christian ethics we have to examine not only the ethical decisions that we human beings make—that is, our *doing*—but, more important, the character of each person as an agent who makes and carries out those decisions—that is, our *being*. The agent always takes precedence over the decision. This emphasis encourages students to move from the question of What? to Who? This paradigm is very important, because discussions in ethics quite often pay too much attention to the analysis of the object of an ethical decision—the doing—while forgetting that behind the doing there is always a free agent who establishes reasons for the doing and then carries it out.

Seen from the paradigm of character ethics, the issue of smoking, for example, is related not simply to the act of smoking itself, independent of the agent and those around the agent, but also to one's character as smoker, about who one is and wants to become. It is not just a question of whether smoking can be justified ethically, but whether the kind of person who pursues individual pleasure, even if claiming it is at his own risk, while damaging himself and the people around him, can be justified. Moreover, it is not only about an individual person's decision but about one's relation with others as well. What needs to be examined is therefore not just what the individual desires but how that desire is related to the lives of one's loved ones, even to everybody else outside of oneself. It is not the case that if one is aware of the risk of an action and is willing to take that risk, then the action

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[6] I use the term "character ethics" to refer to what in ethics discourse is usually called "virtue ethics." Indeed, virtue is a very important element in this kind of ethics, but the whole issue is about character, not simply about virtue.

can be justified. It is about seriously taking into account one's loved ones and everybody else.

The same paradigm can be applied in discussing the role of social media in modern life. It is not simply about whether one's posting, one's status, or one's picture profile can be justified ethically, but about the kind of person one shows oneself to be through what one posts on virtual walls. Nor is it just a matter of freedom of speech or self-expression. Rather, it is about the acquisition of space in the public sphere for private interests, about the way of life that diminishes the public sphere even as the private sphere is expanding seemingly without limits. The discussion must therefore proceed from what can be posted on the internet to what kind of person thinks that we have the right to share private matters in public, even when that public sphere is a virtual one. It is about enlarging our private life at the risk of losing a more accountable and transparent public life.

By the end of the class, I ask students to offer short reflections on the four main themes of the course. The four "teaching blocks" are divided among the total fifteen sessions. Five sessions in the first block comprise an Introduction to Christian Ethics: What is Ethics?, Ethics and Moral Development; Approaches in Ethics; Foundations of Ethical Decision Making; and Representative Models in Christian Ethics. In the second block, addressing Christian Ethics and the Scripture, the sessions include Old Testament Ethics; New Testament Ethics: Synoptic Gospels; New Testament Ethics: Pauline Writings; and The Use of Scripture in Christian Ethics. The third block, on Christian Ethics and Character Formation, comprises The Role of Community in Christian Ethics; Screening of the Film "Amish Grace"; Virtues; Telos, Narrative, and Social Practice; and Christian Ethics and Moral Issues. The last block, on Christian Ethics and Christology, has one session: Modeling Jesus Christ.

The course is designed for three credit hours a week, meaning each weekly classroom meeting should last for 150 minutes. However, I divide each session into two parts. Students meet in small groups for 50 minutes of discussion before class, and then as a whole in the classroom for 100 minutes of lecture. They are required to submit written reports on the small group discussion, including a summary of what each student says. I design the class this way in order to encourage students to finish the reading assignments for

the respective sessions before they come to class. If they aren't prepared, then obviously they can't participate actively in the discussion, both in the small group and in the classroom, and this will be evident in the process report.

This kind of process, in my opinion, is very important, because the educational system in Indonesia is mostly lecture-based. Students are not used to doing independent study or research. They are expected to sit and listen while the teacher lectures. This situation is due to both the feudal system we have inherited and the difficulty of getting resources for teaching. This makes students depend heavily on the knowledge of their teachers. Therefore I try to create a system in which students are encouraged to read the materials and engage with them directly, not waiting for, or depending on, a lecture from me as teacher.

Six Key Challenges

Language and Resources

Teaching Christian ethics, as I mentioned earlier, is not simply a matter of transferring knowledge. It is also a matter of forming and transforming character. Yet the transferring of knowledge is not insignificant. In this regard, one of the biggest problems I face is the availability of resources in a form that is accessible to students, but even more crucial, resources that are available in the Indonesian language, the official language used in Indonesian schools. There are many books on Christian ethics that are available in the library, a number that increases significantly when we include the vast array of e-books and e-journals. However, the problem is that English is neither the primary language for Indonesian students nor the language used in Indonesian schools. In fact, every student in Indonesia has to study English as their third or fourth language. But in a country with more than 500 local languages and one national language which is different from any of the local languages, English is not common. Moreover, the further east one travels in Indonesia, the less familiar people are with English. My students come from all over the country.

Let me paint the picture. The textbooks in Christian ethics that I used almost 40 years ago in seminary are still used today in many Indonesian seminaries, not necessarily because they are classics but because so few books on the subject are available in the Indonesian language. Furthermore,

most Christian ethics books available in the Indonesian language are written by Catholic theologians and are more about moral philosophy than about Christian ethics in the sense Protestants commonly understand it. Fortunately, a publication such as Glen H. Stassen and David P. Gushee's *Kingdom Ethics* has been translated and made available in the Indonesian language, and thus helps a little.[7] Books written by Western missionaries who used to teach Christian ethics in DWCU, such as Malcolm Brownlee and Verne H. Fletcher, and books by Indonesian Christian ethicists such as Eka Darmaputera are also helpful.[8]

Denominations and Traditions
The biggest challenge, however, relates not so much to technical problems such as the availability of books written in the Indonesian language or the Catholic tone of books that are available. Rather, it relates to teaching Christian ethics in an interdenominational setting such as DWCU, namely dealing with the issue of different church traditions that students bring to class. Addressing the use of violence or Christian social responsibility, for example, is not simple. I have to show and explain the theological premises behind different ethical positions found in different theological traditions, but without claiming that one particular tradition is necessarily better than the others. What I prefer to do is to challenge students to think critically, explore, and find out for themselves the kind of Christians they want to become. I want them to feel secure and not intimidated by my Mennonite background (a minority tradition in this university). It is a big challenge, yet it is actually fun to accompany students in this endeavor.

Basic Knowledge
Another big challenge in teaching Christian ethics to so-called Generation

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[7] Glen H. Stassen and David P. Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016).

[8] Malcolm Brownlee, *Pengambilan Keputusan Etis Dan Faktor-Faktor Di Dalamnya* [Ethical Decision Making and the Factors Involved in It] (Bandung: Yayasan Kalam Hidup, 1995); Verne H. Fletcher, *Lihatlah Sang Manusia!: suatu pendekatan pada etika Kristen dasar* [Behold the Man! An Approach in Basic Christian Ethics] (Jogjakarta: Duta Wacana Univ. Press, 1995); Eka Darmaputera, *Etika Sederhana Untuk Semua: Perkenalan Pertama* [Simple Ethics for Everybody: The First Introduction] (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 1992).

Z, whose main characteristic is their intensive use of the internet from an early age, is to bridge the gap between Scripture and the reality of the world. On the one hand, having been born and raised in a digital culture where everything is made easy, simple, fast, and even instantaneous, the majority of my students, if not all, have limited knowledge of the Bible. Even though many of them are from Christian families and spend a lot of time in church activities, they do not have sufficient biblical knowledge. Perhaps this is not a unique problem of theological students but pertains to all Christian youth. Nowadays the Bible has to compete with computer games and social media to get their attention.

On the other hand, ethics is a unique field of study. It is different from other fields in that it can never stand by itself; it always needs other fields of study as its partners. We cannot discuss the ethics of smoking, abortion, cloning, or in vitro fertilization without having at least a little knowledge of medicine. We cannot discuss the ethics of stocks, bonds, or taxes without any knowledge of business and economics. Thus the challenge is not simply how to encourage students to know the Bible better, but how to encourage them to learn about other fields of study, even if it is only a little bit of everything else. However, since I cannot cover the two sides at once, I take up the first issue, the Bible, in the Basics in Christian Ethics class and the second issue, other fields of study, in an advanced elective ethics class.

The lack of knowledge of the Bible creates a serious problem in developing Christian character ethics, since character ethics depends so much on the clarity of *telos*—the center and orientation of life—and the availability of narratives as watersheds for ethical decision making. The *telos* functions like the sun for determining a direction. We will have difficulty in knowing where is East and where is West when there is no sun in the sky to serve as the focal point against which we determine our direction. So it is with virtue and vice. It is hard to determine whether a kind of bravery, such as demonstrated by suicide bombers, is a virtue or a vice until we have clarity about the *telos* we use to judge the action. Yet this *telos* itself is known and learned only through narratives. Thus a lack of knowledge of the Bible will have serious impact on knowing what our Christian *telos* should be.

Concrete Issues

There is still another challenge. It is related to the way Generation Z youth live. As noted earlier, I divide the Basics in Christian Ethics course into four blocks. In the last iteration of the course (Fall 2015), I distributed questionnaires to students at the end of every block. I wanted to get their responses to my materials as well as my methods. The result of that brief survey is very interesting. The questionnaire completed by 52 students shows that in the first block, Introduction to Christian Ethics, the session on The Foundations of Ethical Decision Making is the one that the majority of students like the most (52 percent), followed by the session on Representatives of Models in Christian Ethics (21 percent). The reason for this is that they feel that these sessions provide concrete practical guidance in ethical decision making and help them analyze ethical issues.

In the session on The Foundations of Ethical Decision Making, I draw inspiration from Stassen and Gushee's *Kingdom Ethics* to show the different layers we need to be aware of when talking about ethical norms, namely, immediate judgment at the very top of the pyramid, followed by rules, principles, and basic beliefs. The succeeding layer is deeper and always provides a ground to modify or annul the previous layer. Thus an ethical rule, for instance, can be changed or modified on the basis of ethical principle, and ethical principle can be modified on the basis of basic beliefs.

By knowing which level we are talking about, we can have a better ground in discussing ethical issues with others. By contrast, the discussion of a certain ethical issue will lead us nowhere if we are talking about one certain layer while our partner is talking about a different layer. A discussion about divorce between a person who sticks to the rule "what God has joined together, let no one separate" (Matt. 19:6) and another person who talks about the essence of marriage will lead them nowhere, because the one bases his opinion on rule while the other bases hers on principle. Most of my students love such clear and concrete sessions, compared to more abstract, discursive, and analytical sessions.

So it is with the session on Models in Christian Ethics. Students love it because, according to them, this session provides concrete models about how they can make ethical decisions from a Christian perspective. In this session I discuss the differences in ethical approaches that some leading

figures in Christian ethics have taken, such as Reinhold Niebuhr, Karl Barth, John Howard Yoder, Stanley Hauerwas, and Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza.

Within the second block, Christian Ethics and the Scripture, students overwhelmingly like the session on The Use of Scripture in Christian Ethics the most (82 percent). They say that this session has enlightened them in the way the Scripture is related to practical problems, while not treating the Scripture merely as an ethical dictionary. They also value this session because it connects the Old and New Testaments as one integrated Scripture, not as separate from each other.

In the third block, Christian Ethics and Character Formation, students like most (49 percent) the session featuring the film *Amish Grace* (about the forgiveness that followed the killing of Amish schoolchildren in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, in 2006),[9] followed by the session on Christian Ethics and Moral Issues (26 percent). Here again, students say they like those sessions the most because they see concrete issues and concrete examples of how Christian ethics is to be lived.

From all that I have said so far, we can see that students value the sessions in which they can get in touch with real problems and concrete ethical decisions. On the one hand, this shows what they expect in an ethics class. They want to deal with real issues, not with analytical discourse or theory. On the other hand, this finding also shows what has become the main characteristic of Generation Z. They don't want to spend too much time in learning about the foundation upon which an ethical decision is made. They want a quick answer and an instant process to solve the problem. This is just like what happens in their everyday life: when they have a problem, they go to the internet in order to find an immediate quick answer. They are impatient about having to learn and reflect on too many theories. "Quick," "fast," "instant," and so on are the categories they use to determine answers. They seem not to bother at all with the issue of finding the "right" or even "proper" answers.

Foundations and Stories

In general, it is often said that Generation Z does not care about a foundation for anything in their lives. For them, faith, religion, marriage, relationships,

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[9] *Amish Grace.* Directed by Gregg Campion (20th Century Fox, 2010).

career, and so on do not require one foundation upon which to stand firm. Everything is open-ended. Reality is virtual. Their sentences, as demonstrated in their text messages, are over-punctuated, broken, and under-constructed. That is just the way they are. To push them to think through theories and to find a solid foundation for their arguments is rather ineffective. While *telos* is important in character ethics, as noted above, it should be presented not as foundation upon which we stand but rather as orientation toward which we walk. This is not as easy as it might seem to be. No wonder that students suggested on the questionnaire that they want more study cases, concrete examples, and applicative questions in class, and that they feel the reading materials and class assignments are just too much.

What is also interesting is that students are more enthusiastic not only with discussing concrete cases but with sharing personal stories. The attitude and response of the student who felt intimidated by discussions about unethical aspects of smoking suddenly changed when I shared my personal story of grief in losing my father-in-law because of lung cancer due to smoking, and my struggle in taking care of my own father, almost completely paralyzed for nine years from a stroke likely due to smoking. Personal stories seem to be more respected and accepted by students than abstract moral arguments. This fact re-emphasizes the importance of narrative in character ethics. People can make sense of an ethical decision when they can find proper narratives that become the watershed of the decision. This means that Generation Z is actually not anti-foundational after all, but rather has a different kind of foundation. A mere analytical academic moral argument is worth less for them than a sincere, concrete, touching personal story. They have to be won through their heart, not through their head.

Life Examples

Lastly, more than anything else, Generation Z is sick of the hypocrisy they find in society. Correspondingly, they will respect a teacher who not only talks but, more importantly, walks the talk. This is the biggest challenge in teaching ethics to Generation Z. While they are identified as high-tech and high-touch, living in a high-tech culture, they also long for high-touch from the people around them. They judge their teachers by the life examples they provide. It is the life example that really provides the foundation for the

teacher's authority. This bears out what my former Christian ethics professor, Glen Stassen, always says: Christian ethics is about following Jesus. Christian ethics is nothing until we can demonstrate that we really walk in the path that our great teacher, Jesus Christ, has shown to us.

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