

ethics would help ethics to relate to where the law is lived, where justice is done, where love is expressed, and where community is reinforced. This is one of the few papers given before the Society over the years dealing with pedagogical issues or professional concerns that has been published. It appears in *The Selected Papers 1977*.

Certain other papers have been directed to even broader aspects of the professional role of the Christian ethicist. Two other presentations, both given in 1979, deserve mention. Karen Lebacqz, Carl Marbury, and Howard Hills discussed "Professional Ethicists in Non-academic Roles" at that meeting. Edward L. Long, Jr., in a special afternoon session, helped to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the Society with a preliminary account of its history, and at that time made a promise to prepare a longer version in connection with the twenty-fifth anniversary.

This concludes the account of the programs of the Society--programs that have examined an enormous range of issues in a great variety of ways to the edification of a large proportion of those who are actively engaged in the teaching of Christian ethics in the United States and Canada. The last section of this history will reflect on the significance of the Society's achievements and on its prospects for the future.

Part Four Analysis

Toward the Scholarly Nurture Of a Prophetic Witness

This volume is a study of the conception, growth, and coming to age of a professional organization. If the Society were a human being we could tell much about it at the twenty-fifth anniversary of its birth. A person at twenty-five years of age has undergone more physical development than that person is likely to undergo in the remainder of life. While still "young," that person has acquired full physical growth (except for accretions of fat), basic motor skills, most of the capacity for cognitive learning, and much of the knowledge needed to thrive in the natural and social worlds. The main personality traits are identifiable, if not the maturity and wisdom that come later. Moreover, a person at twenty-five has probably become located in the role, or roles, that will be played out in greater complexity and detail during the remaining years of life.

It would be hazardous to suggest that an organization at its twenty-fifth year stands in an exactly analogous position. The comparison between individuals and groups darf not be pushed very far--though neither does the comparison need to be repudiated altogether. It is legitimate to ask whether the Society of Christian Ethics has now approached the kind of maximized growth, whether the present programs of the Society adequately deal with the range of Christian ethic as a discipline, whether or not the Society has already discovered the skills and procedures that will mark its life for an indefinite future, and what it would mean for a young Society such as this to pass into mature adulthood.

The Society and the Field

The disciplinary focus of the Society has been called both Christian ethics and by the closely related terms Christian social ethics. In fact, as we will see in the discussion below, the Society first designated itself with the second of these terms and then moved to the first.

As fields of learning, both of these terms delineate intellectual pursuits that are far older than the Society. Hence it is important not to equate the history of the Society with the history of an academic discipline. Christian ethics is as old as Christianity itself and even has roots in Old Testament thought. It pays attention to philosophical ethics, which go back to the pre-Socratics, if not to earlier figures. A history of Christian ethics resembles a history of Christian thought and is integrally related to it. Moral theology, which is mainly a Roman Catholic designation, has been taught as preparation of confessors for many centuries. Protestants also use the term theological ethics, which is contrasted with philosophical ethics and is as old as moral reasoning about the good life.

Christian social ethics as a consciously defined field, on the other hand, can be said to have a shorter history. To be sure the Christian churches have always had social teaching, as Ernst Troeltsch has made us aware in his famous history. But teaching about social problems in a way that would translate ethics into action, which is probably the main focus of Christian social ethics, stands at the central of its history rather than at the conclusion of its first twenty-five years. James Dombrowski has recounted the origins of such teaching in his book *The Early Days of Christian Socialism in America* (Columbia University Press, 1936). Dombrowski reports on the surging growth of instruction in social issues at universities and seminaries during the 1880's and 1890's. Such instruction was frequently called by the term Christian sociology or ecclesiastical sociology when offered in schools of divinity, and not infrequently was concerned with social problems in a way that would be somewhat similar to what is now taught by many members of the Society. The academic year 1883-84, which stands just a hundred years prior to the twenty-fifth anniversary which occasions this volume, can be taken as a touchstone for the beginning of Christian social ethics as a special academic undertaking. That is the date which several historians give to the first regularly presented American university course in social ethics as taught in Harvard's curriculum by Francis Greenwood Peabody. (Barton J. Bernstein, "Francis Greenwood Peabody: Conservative Social Reformer," *New England Quarterly* 36, [September, 1963]: 320-337; Jurgen Herbst, "Francis Greenwood Peabody: Harvard's Theologian of the Social Gospel," *Harvard Theological Review* 54, [January 1961]: 55; and Samuel Eliot Morison, *Three Centuries of Harvard: 1636-1936* [Harvard University Press, 1946]: 377.)

Peabody taught social ethics to students of both the

College and the Divinity School. Of the reasons leading him to teach that course Professor Peabody wrote:

I was led to my subject by a somewhat different road from most of those who deal with it. As a teacher of ethics I became aware of the chasm which exists between such abstract study and the practical applications of moral ideals; and it seemed to me possible to approach the theory of ethics inductively, through the analysis of social movements, which could be easily characterized and from which principles could be deduced. I studied thus with my class the problems of Charity, Divorce, the Indians, the Labor Problem, Intemperance, with results of surprising interest. . . . the students felt a living interest in the subjects treated; and I think they will be more publicly spirited as citizens and more discreet as reformers by even this slight opportunity for research [offered in this class]. There is in this department a new opportunity in university instruction. With us it has been quite without precedent. It summons young men who have been imbued with the principles of political economy and of philosophy to the practical application of those studies. It ought to do what college work rarely does—bring a young man's studies near to the problems of an American's life. (Sanborn, F.B., "The Social Sciences, Their Growth and Future," *The Journal of Social Science* XXI [1886]: 7-8).

Just as Francis Greenwood Peabody was concerned to introduce young persons to social problems and to prompt them to dedicate their talents to the alleviation of the conditions that created them, so a deep social passion has been a central factor in the odyssey of many who have subsequently taught Christian ethics. Certainly the experience of a ministry in Hell's Kitchen was pivotal in shaping the academic career of Walter Rauschenbusch, and the experience of pastoring auto workers in Detroit influenced Reinhold Niebuhr's teaching ministry in numerous ways. There are many members of the Society of Christian Ethics who first became interested in the study of Christian ethics from a passion, however modest, to do something about social evils. The decision to teach social ethics was their attempt to give pedagogical shape to such deep underlying concerns, and this often brought them into teaching situations having a professed identification with Christian faith. Dombrowski points out that in the concluding two decades of the last century those with social concerns frequently ended up teaching in seminaries, and the same may be said for a number of those who have belonged to the Society in its first

twenty-five years. However, one of the important developments that has taken place during the life of the Society has been the spread of the field into colleges and universities. That change in the location where many members of the Society did their teaching took place at the time when neutralism was becoming increasingly prevalent in the academic world, and when excellence in the mastery of a discipline was becoming more respected than the impulse for social reform. Partly because of this, the formation of The American Society of Christian Social Ethics (as it was first named) came about from quite different impulses that did the initial teaching of Christian social ethics.

The reasons for the founding of the Society were partly logistical and stemmed from the desire of those already teaching Christian social ethics in the late 1950's to have greater interchange with each other. The Society was formed because these persons sought a professional identity separate from the professors of such subjects in the seminary curriculum as religious education, homiletics, and worship. The Society's formation is probably best understood as a part of what Christopher Jencks and David Riesman have identified as the academic revolution, which placed more and more emphasis in higher education on disciplinary self-awareness. The academic revolution located the teacher in the connectionalism of a discipline more than in the camaraderie of a cause or in the community of a single institution. It was buoyed by an expansion of colleges and universities to meet postwar needs. That considerable growth in the size of institutions was accompanied by the introduction, often for the first time, of the teaching of religious studies, even in colleges and universities having no confessional or ecclesial identity. The increase of people teaching religion in the broader humanistic sense had a component in the increase in those teaching Christian social ethics, although the growth of the Society of Christian Ethics has been relatively modest in comparison with the growth over the corresponding period of the group known in the 1950's as the National Association of Biblical Instructors and more recently as the American Academy of Religion.

The development of the Society was affected both by the growth in the numbers teaching social ethics and related subjects and by the tendency of academics in those times to locate themselves among other academics teaching the same subject in other institutions. During much of the period covered by this study there has been a concern among some of its members to develop a still more careful delineation of Christian social ethics as a field. This concern owes a great deal of its inspiration to Walter G. Muelder, who has

frequently pled for a genuinely interdisciplinary field in which the "practitioners undertake joint theoretical and empirical studies in theology, ethics, and the behavioral and historical sciences." ("Christian Social Ethics Bookshelf," *The Christian Century* 30 [October 30, 1963]: 1336.) In 1972 Paul Deats, Jr., one of Muelder's close associates, observed that clarity in methodology was long in coming and suggested that "... social ethics must become more systematic and rigorous in clarifying definitions, employing more adequate concepts, and testing generalizations and theoretical probes." ("The Quest for a Social Ethic," Paul Deats, Jr., ed., *Toward a Discipline of Social Ethics*: [Boston University Press, 1972]: 72). Elaborating on this point, Deats indicated what would be entailed in developing a more self-conscious understanding of social ethics as a discipline:

The movement toward such a discipline would seem to involve at least the following: (1) a self-conscious community of inquiry and exchange, with a continuing attempt to focus on commonly defined problems; (2) an interdisciplinary effort to work out the understanding of what constitutes an ethical issue in social policy; (3) an evolving body of knowledge, with principles of evaluation; and (4) a reflective alternation between detachment--with attention to theory--and involvement--with concern for practice. (*Ibid.*, 42).

The life of the Society has provided something quite close to the first of the conditions identified by Deats a necessary for the emergence of a discipline, though not perhaps, with as clear a view of the problems to be faced as might be called for. It has made some contribution to the second of the conditions, though there have been only a few representatives of such particular disciplines as philosophy, sociology, and law among its members to make the truly interdisciplinary. The meetings of the Society and the publications flowing from those meetings have provided a large body of material with which to be evaluated. Finally, as to how that material is to be evaluated. Finally, the Society has discussed the interaction between detachment and involvement, leaving its members to work out their own resolution of this tension with a touch of fear and trembling. These are contributions to the development of discipline in the sense that Deats and Muelder have envisioned it, but hardly a finished product.

On balance, it must be admitted that there has been very little success over the years in achieving a theoretic consensus as to how Christian social ethics should go abo

its task, and probably little more consensus about the methodology of Christian ethics. Members of the Society often do their own thing, or things, in quite different ways. They are held together by common interests and personal loyalties as much or more than by a clear definition of a discipline as such. Perhaps this renders the field weak. Perhaps it undercuts its credibility among those who are especially self-conscious about academic matters. Perhaps it furnishes an unfinished agenda that should be pursued with greater zeal in the second quarter of the Society's life. Perhaps it suggests that the burden of social concern spills beyond the perimeters of the academic enterprise in the strictly disciplinary sense.

The Significance of the Names

One of the best ways to examine how the Society has understood itself over the years is to look at the various names it has adopted to describe itself. The frequent name changes--which may be a bit unique among professional groups--reveal the complexities involved in thinking about the field (or fields) of Christian ethics. Behind the changes it is possible to discover disagreements about, or at least shifts in, the way the membership has seen itself and its scholarly calling. Each of the words in the names of the Society has, over the years, been both a source of identity and a matter of friendly contention.

The first name change took place with the founding of the Society. The term "seminary professors," was prominent in the title of the parent or forerunner group, and was dropped from the designation given to the new organization. It came to be generally recognized, and rather commonly acknowledged, that scholarship in the field need not be carried on only in institutions that train the professional clergy despite some long historic ties between social ethics and seminary teaching. The Society has never assumed that Christian social concern is a clerical monopoly. But neither has it ever felt that scholarly integrity is somehow difficult to reconcile with the practice of ministry. In this latter respect life in the Society has been significantly different from that in much American higher education during the period. Schools of divinity in colleges and universities have not always had an easy time of it being accepted as full partners in the scholarly communities in which they have been located. Some divinity schools have even been dissolved or allowed to wither because the surrounding academic community has not regarded them as important or felt them to be worthy of significant support. This problem has not been present in the life of the Society, nor has there ever been a conscious separation

between the clergy and lay members of the group. The shift away from a membership composed largely of those who teach in seminaries to a more composite group has not expressed itself as a repudiation of those at work in schools of divinity, but rather as a welcoming of those with similar interests working in more general educational settings, whether in college teaching, church related bureaucracies, or other kinds of professional activities. A common interest in the subject matter has held the Society together and enabled it to transcend differences that in many other settings have been matters occasioning open breaks or subtly covert suspicions.

The scholarly self-identification of the Society has enabled it to bring together persons from many different branches of the Christian tradition. In particular, the Society was remarkably swift to facilitate collegiality between Protestants and Roman Catholics once the door to such cooperation was opened even to the slightest extent. The collegiality between these two groups quickly became as complete as the collegiality within either of them. This was no perfunctory ecumenism, but a true coming together on the basis of scholarly endeavour and mutual concern that has been one of the rich aspects of the Society's life. It has led, in several cases, to other interchanges as members of the Society have been invited to participate in many of each other's activities. Moreover, this collegiality has withstood some tensions that have arisen from the fact that there remain some fundamental differences about social policies (like abortion) between these two groups.

The Society's membership has also included some representatives of groups whose attitude on the nature of Christian social responsibility differs from that of most main line Christian practice. There are among its members some who belong to traditions that require an intentionally different life style of their members. For instance, some members of the Society come from groups that understand Christian discipleship to require a very clear separation from those political uses of power and entrepreneurial manipulations that are so much a part of military/industrial complexes and a technical/commercial world in general. Some members of the Society have similar convictions about the incompatibility of Christian discipleship and participation in the world of ordinary affairs, but are not identified with an intentional tradition. The proportion of those having such commitments may not be high, since by the very nature of their position those holding to such a view of Christian discipleship may not be regular joiners of main line bodies, but their presence has been an important witness among us. In contrast to those who stress Christian

distancing from the world, there are members of the Society whose interpretation of Christian realism makes the use of power one of the main criteria of social responsibility--even some whose position in this regard veers toward an embrace of realpolitik. However vehement has been the polemic between these contrasting approaches outside, in the Society they have been respected by, and respectfully of, each other.

In another contrast, not precisely congruent with the two attitudes just described, there are those who see the American experiment as having gone awry--having replaced its dedication to freedom and belief in equality for all people with an exercise of hegemonous power used mainly for the protection of economic privilege both at home and abroad. There are others who see the American dream, whatever its imperfections, as a remaining hope and symbol of freedom in a world of rampant collectivist tyranny. These two groups are not unaware of the tensions between them--though those tensions have led to polemics that have been exchanged more sharply outside of the Society than within its gatherings. In the Society there has been a semblance of community maintained, and in many cases, even communication.

But there are limits to the inclusiveness which the Society has been able to achieve. In a paper, "Liturgy and Ethics," given at the January 1979 meeting and later published in *The Journal of Religious Ethics* VII, (Fall 1979): 162, Paul Ramsey suggested: "Our Society will not be truly national until Evangelicals are made welcome among us, brought into our dialogue, get on the program, etc." Of course there have been individual evangelicals in our midst, many of whom have made distinctive contributions both to the field and to the Society. But those particular evangelicals who have been most at home among us have been just as estranged as have been our other members from another kind of evangelical with high public visibility and a sizable conservative following. During the lifetime of the Society, indeed mainly in the latter few years of its history, groups of politically conservative and doctrinally fundamentalist Christians who once eschewed the idea of social Christianity have taken a new (and, to many, a disturbing kind of) interest in political issues. Many of them now champion an approach to public questions that is at odds with much that has been taken for granted within the confines of our group. This presents the Society with a challenge--made poignant by Ramsey's observation. Are we to

assume that the ideological split between the kind of thinking in the Society (with all its contrasts) and the kind of thinking done by the resurgent right wing is so great that it is foolish to anticipate any dialogue with each other? Or, are we to hope and act on the belief that

barriers can be surmounted--even in this area--by a combination of scholarly fairness and theologically rooted grace? Are we to treat the obvious appeal which such conservatism has to a large part of the public by dismissing it merely as a pandering to a desire for escape from worldly cares, or are we to see that such groups speak to many people who are deeply concerned about the losses of integrity and erosion of disciplined fidelity that have become too prevalent features of modern society?

The next name change took place in 1964, five years after the Society was founded. The adjective "social" was dropped from the title. It was argued that the adjective was redundant--that all ethics are by their very nature social in character. Properly understood, Christian ethic should involve social concerns, and Christian social ethic interfaces theological endeavors (such as moral theology and theological ethics) with disciplines such as law and sociology, anthropology, politics and economics. The change of name indicated that those with theological competence could be members even if they were not adept in the social scientific study of religion or versed in some other academic skills useful to an interdisciplinary approach. Those who thought of themselves more as sociologists than as theologians would be welcome if they were willing to converse across the interface. Frequently those who have considered themselves Christian sociologists have made their church or the professional practice of ministry their special concern. Some of them remained in the Society despite the subtle shift of focus that took place in its orientation. Such scholars might have been more comfortable with a name that explicitly embraced a more empirical approach to the study of religion and society rather than leaving to inference the understanding they were welcome and even necessary to the agenda of the group. It is probably correct to say that, on balance, the Society has come to attract those who identify more with a theological methodology than with sociological one, that is, if either has to be taken itself. This may be one of the reasons why, during the lifetime of the Society of Christian Ethics, a number of its members have joined with scholars having more direct interests in sociological investigation in the activities of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, which does stress the empirical approach more consistently than does the SCE. From different perspective the removal of the term "social" from the name of the Society either reflected or has helped to prompt another tendency in its life. The Society has been--as we have already noted--a professional scholarly, association having Christian social action as object of its study. It has also been, as we have noted,

academically oriented community that has accepted participation in confessional communities by its individual members as fully compatible with scholarly achievement. The Society has not, however, been a social action group--a fact that has sometimes been a source of concern for certain of its members. Dieter Hessel's paper, "Solidarity Ethics: A Public Focus for the Church," read at the 1977 meeting, raised questions about the life of the Society in this particular. Hessel noted that the tendency of Christian ethicists over the years has been to gravitate toward a professional academic posture, and he urged members of the Society to remember that the discipline began with an attention to the social question that was at least as much oriented to social reform as it was concerned with scholarly pursuits. He spoke of the value of a "koinonia of concern" that focuses on the struggle to meet social needs and that strives for social justice in the world. He mentioned as his model the Fellowship of Socialist Christians and might well also have suggested the Fellowship of Southern Churchmen.

Certainly it does not follow that keeping the word "social" in the name of the Society would have made a major qualitative difference in its life. The pressure for academic professionalism was in the very atmosphere at the time when the Society was discovering its identity. But the issue raised by the removal of the word does not go away. The history of the Action/Reflection Group shows that the concern that was articulated by Hessel has been shared by many for a long time within the life of the Society. That group tried to bring the reflective scholarly aspect of doing Christian ethics together with an active participatory aspect. Few members of the Society took issue with such premises, but a relatively small number of its members were ready to make the necessary change in professional posture that would have been entailed in making concerns about social questions a matter of group action rather than of group inquiry.

Hessel was pleading for a *praxis* within a confessional group seeking to be faithful to the Word in a hostile environment. He envisioned the need to struggle against deepening human privation, against social wrong-doing, and against economic self-interest. He was correct in observing that it has not been the history or the character of the Society to undertake that kind of struggle. He was also correct in observing that to a significant extent the Society had evolved a posture that was different from that which characterized much early teaching of Christian social ethics. Perhaps this primarily academic posture of the Society--which was shaped during the consolidation of the welfare state--will not be adequate for the future. The

nation seems presently headed toward a democratically and publicly approved repudiation of the welfare vision, and toward the embrace of values that place more reliance upon the possession of power than upon the achievement of righteousness, that judges privilege more important to safeguard than equity, that considers entrepreneurial success more to be honored than compassion, and that often emphasizes the place of coercive discipline, police power, and military force in the preservation of order. Under these circumstances, many members of the Society may well feel the need for making something like a Barman declaration that say "No" to a national agenda that includes so many things that remind us of values cherished by fascism. The Society may find itself a group in which many members are prompted to examine the historical precedents and theological legitimations for a renewed concern about the social question. But are Barman declarations ever made by strictly academic groups--or only by confessing bodies? The academic vehicle for all the values it does embody, and for all the collegiality it does make possible, may not have the spiritual resources to resist cultural and political malignancy. However, it can help those who come to feel the need of making a witness to find ways to make it boldly, and it may help them to do so with a greater understanding and wise appreciation of its significance. Moreover, it is probably fair to suggest that the Society, despite its general tendency to be somewhat conservative, would be at least a likely to nurture the kind of understanding and witness that may be needed in a period of heightened societal injustice as would parish experience in most main line church bodies.

The discussions about the name change that took place in 1980 raised an entirely different set of issues. These issues are to be understood as much in light of what was no longer done as in what was done at the time of this, the last tinkering with our designation. The decision to drop the term "American" had more symbolic than substantive import. (A proposal to replace the term "American" with "North American" generated some initial support but was defeated.) From the very first, membership and participation in the Society had been shared alike by persons in the United States and Canada. The decision to drop the term "American" took away whatever chauvinism might lurk in a title that could be read as referring only to the United States. However, when the Society dropped the term it did not, by this action, become any more international. The proportion of Canadian members did not change, nor did the orbit of the Society's influence suddenly expand. A little greater effort was started to make the members of the Society aware of the *Societas Ethicas*, our counterpart of

the European continent with a membership of 233 in October of 1981. A copy of their membership roster was included in one of our mailings and our members were urged to make contact with their members as travels and scholarly endeavours made that possible. Very few of our members have availed themselves of that suggestion. Clearly, there is much more that can be done to facilitate interchange between these two kindred bodies, both by alerting our members to become more interested in the *Societas Ethicas* and in getting their members to be more interested in us. We might also do well to consider how to interest Latin American scholars in membership, and to bring more ethicists from overseas into some kind of association with us. If, as has been pointed out by Walbert Bulmann in *The Coming of the Third Great Church* (Orbis Books, 1977) the majority of Christians will be living south of the equator within a decade, it will not prove satisfactory to have a Society that facilitates interaction only between persons living and working in North America or on continents bordering the North Atlantic.

Even more significant issues of purpose and identity were involved in the decision that was made in 1980, after much discussion, to keep the term "Christian ethics" rather than move to the phrase "religious ethics" for the name of the Society. In deciding to stay with the original designation the membership turned back at least two different impulses. There was, on the one hand, a feeling that the term "Christian" was a possible stumbling block to Jewish scholars who are concerned with many of the same issues as members of the Society. There were four Jewish scholars on our rolls in 1979 and it is not clear how many others would have joined a renamed group. Undoubtedly their contributions would be of enormous value, as the task force on the relationship between Jewish and Christian ethics made clear. The programs would undoubtedly have begun to take Jewish thinking more into account, for its own (and continuing) significance and not merely as background for (or comparison with) Christian reflection. Moreover, the Society would probably have felt it appropriate to shift its meeting time so as to avoid the Sabbath and thus make it possible for more Jewish scholars to be present.

Another impulse behind the proposal to designate the society with the term "religious ethics" was the feeling that the academic study of religion in colleges and universities had broken out of Christian confines. By changing its name the Society would take note of this and place itself squarely in the academic context of religious studies—eliminating any possible stigma that members of pluralistically oriented departments of religion would suffer from being identified with a group having a name that

could be taken as indicating a confessional identity instead of a focus of inquiry. On a purely pragmatic level it might have made it easier for some members to claim travel funds to meetings in instances where the scholarly nature and functions of the Society were difficult to interpret to secular educators or to bursars with an eye on avoiding the use of public monies for specifically religious purposes.

The decision to retain the designation "Christian" rather than to move to the term "religious" should be understood in relationship to many of the things that have been observed about the nature of the Society in the discussion in the forepart of this chapter. Throughout the history of the Society, academic and professional considerations have proven more operative than social action concerns or confessional identities. In the decision it took respectively the last proposed name change, the Society drew back from the total embrace of prevailing academic tendencies and regard concern about just one tradition with something akin to suspicion. The decision, therefore, possibly represented a mood contrasting with, though by no means repudiating, the Society's tendency throughout much of its life to become more and more academic. It would no more be pushed wholly into a neutral or secular academic milieu than it would stay confined to a confessional one.

In addition to shying away from the complete embrace of the pluralistic/secular mind-set of the university, the Society was also saying that the Christian tradition sufficiently large and broad in and by itself to demand complete attention, or certainly to constitute the government focus of inquiry, for this particular group. The membership as presently constituted could not presume to be skillful as scholars of religious ethics in the broad sense. While some of its members, only a handful at that, were exploring comparative religious ethics as an ancillary interest, the others were hardly enough of them working with sufficient thoroughness or breadth in those directions to transform the presence of the group into a whole new entity. In sum, the Society was saying that, although it welcomes members from any (or even from no) religious tradition, it would keep its focus on one tradition thinks and acts, or upon how that tradition can be understood from the perspective of other traditions rather than on how all traditions are equally understood.

The Dynamics of Bonding

Although the major impulses for the founding of the Society of Christian Ethics were logistical and professional, sharing in many respects the pedagogical professionalism of the academic revolution, the Society never became simply and solely a professional organization

in the narrow sense of that term. The programs of the meetings have not been dominated by persons mainly trying to increase their visibility or to buck for promotion. The Society has never operated a placement service and its meetings have seldom seen large numbers of people sneaking off to hotel rooms or other gathering places for interviews or other job hunting rituals. Moreover, the Society has not been a group of people talking about what is going on elsewhere, but a gathering of those who have been the makers of the discipline itself. It is difficult to identify any productive American scholar in the field of Christian ethics who has not participated in the life of the Society.

It is not easy to convey, without appearing to be triumphalistic, the sense of collegiality which is found--for many, in a unique way--in the life of the Society. Many of our members, active in a variety of professional academic groups and in social action movements of different kinds, report that life in the Society has a unique quality. As one of them put it, "SCE meetings are really old home week for most of us, sometimes the only place where one finds colleagues of very high caliber with the same passions and fascinations (and, I am sure, foibles) that preoccupy us most of our working days amidst colleagues with quite different agendas. The fabric and tissue of interaction outside the sessions and in late night discussions at these meetings is simply not present most places---it approximates Aristotle's Friendship."

Something powerful holds the Society together. It is nothing less than a bonding of informed concern--a bringing together of those whose scholarship has both an intrinsic value and a social reason for being. This may be a transmuted extension of the very same impulse that prompted Peabody, Rauschenbusch, and Niebuhr to be pioneers in our discipline. While the Society has never been the structural channel of direct social action, it has been a place from which to have the wellsprings of social caring refurbished with the living waters of substantive input and prophetic insight. Every prophet needs a quiet place of nourishment as well as a market place for proclamation, and every scholar who would take the social question or social questions seriously must have a place where insights are gathered, understandings compared, information acquired, and thought re-envisioned. Many have come to the meetings of the Society year-by-year precisely because they have felt these things to happen--perhaps in an unplanned way--at its gatherings. As measured on some scales, the Society has been conservative--surely its members do not all share an activist agenda or radical leanings. It has been concerned not to take action as much as to understand why action has

to be taken, not to dictate agendas but to see why values have to be made socially functional, not to plump for a single point of view but to recognize why commitments are important to social well-being.

Another possible explanation for the success of the Society is its modest size. It has not grown unwieldy. It still has a sense of having a single corporate identity and not of being merely an umbrella for a host of diverse pursuits. The fact that it has kept to the practice of having a goodly number of plenary sessions at each annual meeting helps to insure that everyone has some experiences in common. Moreover, its members treat the business meetings with respect and participate with zest. The resultant decisions reflect the deliberative will of the group as a whole rather than the private agenda of a special cadre. Lastly, the membership has suffered little turn-over and many of those who were present "at the creation" still attend the meetings with remarkable regularity. Regionalism has not become widespread, and where it has developed it supports rather than competes with the activities and programs of the parent body.

Along with these grand commitments and ideal conditions the Society has been held together by dedicated leadership. The willingness of its members to be personally involved in its governance and supportive of its operations is a no inconsiderable source of its strength. The Society has never been managed by those making its operation their main calling and chief means of professional livelihood. Across the years it has spent but a fraction of its budgetary resources on administrative costs and services. Year after year the nominations committees have come up with candidates willing to give themselves voluntarily to the work of making policy and of performing all the many logistical operations that turn policy from mere resolve to living accomplishment.

The major work falls on the program committee that meets each spring to plan for the meeting the next January. That committee has been composed of the officers and some co-opted persons in the vicinity of its place of meeting. The editor of *The Annual* carries a particularly heavy responsibility. To collect the papers, coordinate the judgment of the paper selection committee, decide with the editorial board which ones to publish, gather other kinds of contributions, and see *The Annual* made camera-ready for publication, is a major set of tasks. Not all of those who give papers at the annual meetings are zealous about putting them into written form or seeing that they are submitted on time. The editor of *The Annual* has in recent years helped to see that papers are systematically collected and properly channeled into the archives of the Society. That obligation

might well be made a regular part of the editor's task, especially if no one else is officially designated to be the ongoing archivist of the Society.

But all these important factors in explaining the coherence of the Society pale besides the significance of the work performed across the years by the executive secretaries. More than any other factor, the life of the Society has been sustained and nurtured by these persons who have the longest tenures of any officers and perform the most demanding duties. The executive secretaries have been most directly responsible for the ongoing activities of the organization, and have helped to maintain the Society's identity--its continuity between past, present, and future. The executive secretaries carry out decisions and policies made by the board, by the executive committee, by the members at the annual business meeting, and by the program committees. This requires them to perform myriad detailed tasks and to make independent decisions at various points. They assist the president and others in numerous ways, a process that requires sensitivity to yearly changes in leadership style and tact in the exercise of an office that must work with such changes.

One valuable function of the executive secretary is to reflect from time-to-time about the direction in which the Society is moving and the ways in which things are being done. The executive secretary must help other officers to think about the need for possible change. The executive secretary, who is the most visible person in the ongoing life of the Society, maintains contact with as many members as possible, knows their interests and contributions to the field, assists in processing the applications of new members and seeing that their names are placed on appropriate mailing lists, pays the bills and keeps financial records up-to-date, and maintains connections with the Council for the Study of Religion. Although the executive secretary may look busy at the annual meeting, the responsibilities carried at that time are only a fraction of the tasks which must be performed. Most of the work is done from week to week throughout the year through correspondence and frequent long distance telephone calls. As Joseph Allen approached the end of his term of service he drew up a list of the duties involved. That list is seven pages long--single spaced! It indicates what a continuous and complex set of responsibilities has evolved upon the office of the executive secretary.

Some Conjectures About the Future

It is hazardous to look too far into the future, yet one cannot totally ignore the questions that seem likely to

confront us as we move into the second quarter century of the Society's life. One of the most persistent questions is whether the intimate collegiality of the Society's life which so many of its members understandably cherish, can be indefinitely sustained. Even if the increase in the number of people teaching in the discipline has begun to taper off (which is by no means clear), the relatively rapid growth in the size of the Society in the last several years does make it necessary to ask whether it will be as possible to have a sense of scholarly bonding among six or seven hundred as it has been to have it among one, or two, or three hundred members. Moreover, the next decade will see many who have been members of the Society from its very founding retire from active teaching, shy away from winter-time travel, and find themselves unable to continue the kind of participation that has provided a special continuity during so much a part of the past twenty-five years of the Society's life.

Moreover, the cost of holding national meetings has greatly increased in recent years, and a wholly different pricing pattern for air travel has come into effect. Unless institutional budgets escalate, it will be increasingly difficult to gather a large proportion of the members in single meeting. The pressure to make regional groups more active--with all the changes that pattern could bring about--may well increase irresistibly.

Another question that may confront us is whether we are being faithful if we talk mainly to ourselves. When one considers how small the membership of the Society is in comparison with the whole academic enterprise, or the population of the country as a whole, it does make it necessary to ask how large a group has to be in order to have a significant public influence. Perhaps it is not size but postulate that counts. There is great value in talking to one another which is possible in such a small group--that we should cherish and continue to do so. But if talking to each other means we talk only to ourselves, then we shall have betrayed the impulses that gave birth to Christian social ethics a hundred, and to the Society itself twenty-five years ago.

We run the danger of talking only to ourselves several ways. One way is to be interested only in the professional group itself, run around only with our own kind pay attention only to those who pursue the same kind teaching and academic research as we pursue, or reassemble the very same set of people in other organizations to which we belong. That is a heady and exciting kind of life live, but does it suffice even as a scholarly service? Another way of talking only to ourselves is to write professional papers only for this group, or for the very same colleagues assembled in other groups, and not to prepare

materials which the general citizenry or membership of the churches can read. Is it enough for the study of Christian ethics to be a self-sustaining enterprise done mainly for its own sake and the innate satisfactions it yields, and not for the sake of some large public good? The greatest question for the future may well be, not whether Christian ethics as a discipline remains a viable concern of a handful of scholarly types, but whether Christian commitment finds and maintains a significant place among a broader constituency, both in the North American orbit and in other vital parts of a shrinking globe.

Christian ethics will be likely to be robust in the future only if there are vibrant communities of Christian faith all over the world and viable Christian institutions in the places where Christian ethicists try to work. It is by no means sure that Christian faith will remain particularly vital in the places it has flourished in the past. Culture faith and "main street" religiosity are too pervasive in their consequences merely to be ignored or simply by-passed in a more specialized attention to the niceties of academic pursuits, and, if they wholly conquer institutional Christianity in the North American scene, the impact upon the academic enterprise of Christian ethics as it has been practiced in the Society will be debilitating. Then too, there are many parts of the church that regard the scholarly and the academic enterprise with distrust, if not with disdain. If the institutional expressions of Christianity as we know them in our immediate milieu progressively decline in quality, even if they do survive, that also will undermine the possibility of doing Christian ethics well. Unless we address these deteriorating conditions in both church and culture and find ways to cope with them, the commitment of the Society to the learned study of a Christian response to social questions may come to very little. If robust Christian ethics can exist only within a context of vibrant faith and viable Christian institutions, and if those very contexts are eroding right under our very noses, then business as usual for a Society such as ours will not insure a promising future.

In his provocative and suggestive treatment of theological education, Edward Farley talks about the trends toward specialization that have made each of the branches of theological study something of an academic speciality rather than an expression of a more unifying theological enterprise. "Each [of the disciplines]," he writes, "gathered the sociological accoutrements of a science: the research-oriented journals, the professional society, the graduate program in that science alone, the delimitation of research projects within the bounds (the language, methods,

literature) of that science, the nationwide or worldwide collegium of scholars in that science." (Edward Farley, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education*, (Fortress Press, 1983.)) There is a sense in which that has happened within the field of Christian ethics though perhaps not quite to the same extent or with the self-conscious intensity that it has happened to some other academic disciplines. Farley then suggests ways in which the theological school should move to a more inclusive whole, for which he employs the old term *Theologia*—a term which implies a conjunction of the active and contemplative life.

We will no more be helped to bring reflection and practice into a closer conjunction by what has occurred in higher education in general in recent years than by what has happened in much ecclesiastical life. While in the case of the theological enterprise ministerial practice has too frequently become an highly individualized caring for personal needs apart from any social transformation, in the case of higher education, a narrow professionalism has appeared that treats employability as the bottom line. Christian social responsibility cannot be significantly advanced by either.

The Society of Christian Ethics is a young organism—vigorous, healthy, enthusiastic. It has come through its birth, weaning, growth, and major period of skill development with remarkable success. It is, hopefully, ready to contribute rather than merely to take sustenance from its social world, to enter the serving task of inquiry and public responsibility. Perhaps the greatest contribution it can render in this regard, without repudiating the main thrust of its early life, is to ask how it can move toward the kind of total undertaking which Farley has in mind, on to the kind of great concern about the condition of society itself that ought to be the central reason for either the university or the seminary to exist.

The same year in which Peabody began teaching social ethics at Harvard, the report of the American Social Science Association, which became the professional association of the then embryonic field of sociology, contained these words of its secretary, Professor F. B. Sanborn of Cornell University: ". . . for we cannot too often consider and repeat that the origin of every science and preeminently of the social sciences is divine." That perspective hardly thrives in the university today, nor are the social sciences much more adept at fostering social concern than other branches of learning. The Society of Christian Ethics has shared the impulses that have brought the intellectual disciplines to a new perspective on themselves and the world, but perhaps it has another calling to pioneer—

that will involve questioning whether these discipline-oriented developments in the academic enterprise have made us sufficiently adequate to meet the challenges of circumstances in which the cry for justice cannot be indefinitely ignored with impunity and threats of ever increasing retribution cannot be relied upon interminably for ordering the world.

The growing human being may be said to take more away from its environment during the first twenty-five years of its life than it contributes. But unless that pattern reverses, and during the subsequent twenty-five or so years the human being contributes more than it takes away from its surrounding communities, then we say that the human being has not reached full maturity. At twenty-five years of age the time of introspective and self-oriented development should be over. The time for increased responsibility has begun. If we can say at this juncture that the Society has grown up and is strong and vibrant, may it be possible to say in another twenty-five years that the Society has matured and learned to play a prophetic and mediating role in helping Christians and their institutions, as well as the wider society, to join in moving toward a more just and compassionate ethos. The story of the next twenty-five years ought to trace the contributions of this group to the surrounding world with as much record of achievement as this account has traced the story of the birth, growth, and consolidation of the organization as an academic guild of remarkable quality.