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SCE – Seattle

**Comments on the 2020 SCE Committee Report: The Future of Christian Ethics:**

**Informal Reading Draft**

I want to begin with an acknowledgement of the trepidation I feel about commenting on the future of the field of Christian ethics, especially in response to this very rich document prepared by a rather intimidating committee. It is clear that many hours of thankless work have gone into this report and all I ask is that the following comments be considered as an expression of gratitude for all that has gone into it.

In the limited time I have this morning, I would like to make one observation about the picture of the field that emerges in the report along with three further observations about elements of the field that are only tangentially (or perhaps emotively) present in the report.

*A. An Observation Concerning Relative Stability*

The first observation that I would like to comment on briefly is simply that I was surprised to see the relative stability of the field over the past twelve years in terms of the percentage of positions advertised at AAR and the predominance of hires in the “tenure-track” category—both good news in this economy. Of course, this stability is relative to the larger fluctuations in the academic world, but it appears that our field is no more “expendable” than other religion-related fields that advertise through AAR…and I think that we ought to consider that at least moderately good news…

Further, one other mark of stability: it appears that Catholic institutions have been hiring Christian ethicists more than any other type of institution for over a decade (with only 1 exception). I assume that this does not necessarily mean that Catholic institutions are hiring only Catholics and that Catholics are not getting jobs in other institutions…but I think the report rightly notes that any longevity to this trend will have a significant effect on the field (and I will return to this observation).

*B. Three Further Comments beyond the Report*

The Report of the 2020 Committee captures some of the important quantifiable elements of the field (especially for those of us who appreciate making a living doing this work). But, laced within and perhaps behind the report, there seems to be an amorphous anxiety about our field…yes, there is the obvious anxiety about employment statistics…and we could add other things to that list that we should be anxious about, for example: (a) the gender and racial imbalances in the field; (b) the practice of accepting way more PhD students in the field than we can ever hope to find jobs; (c) the evolving relationship between non-tenured and tenured/tenure-track members of the field; and (d) the national myopia that creeps into the field. These (and others) are all appropriate sources of anxiety that deserve considerable further attention…but these are not what I want to concentrate on this morning.

Rather, I want to attend to what I believe to be another kind of anxiety also haunts the report, a kind of anxiety about what exactly we are talking about when we are talking about Christian ethics. Therefore, the remainder of my comments are directed toward this latent anxiety because I am convinced that how we—collectively—address this anxiety will determine the future of the field. To that end, please bear with me as I indicate three further unstated issues that are shaping and will continue to shape the field of Christian ethics.

**1. The Expansive Size of the Field.** In the 1950’s, the SCE began as a dozen or so Protestant seminary professors but, for at least the past decade, there have been over 1000 members…and many of us neither teach at a seminary nor are Protestant. The fact is that although many of us recognize the names and faces (and perhaps even know) some of the more “famous” or “popular” members of the society—and I’m not sure how else to say that—the vast majority of the other members of the society are unknown to the vast majority of us. The effect, as one might expect, is that there is increasingly less of a common “center” around which we all naturally gather, whether that center is an institution, an issue, an interest, or an individual. [It may be worth noting that how we then work together within this context requires patience, humility, and generosity (and we have been blessed by a large cloud of witnesses in this respect)—without these, it appears to me that the stability of the field itself is up for grabs.] The observation concerning the size of the field naturally leads to a related observation concerning the increased specialization and diversity within the field (both in terms of teaching and research).

2. **The Increased Specialization and Diversity within the Field**. Until very recently, it was possible to conclude that the majority of the papers presented at the SCE Annual Meeting dealt with “foundational issues—that is, consideration of the biblical, historical, philosophical, theological, and social-scientific grounding of the discipline.”[[1]](#footnote-1) And, I suspect how different institutions valued these various foundations lies at the root to the programmatic distinctions between “Christian Ethics” and “Moral Theology” PhD programs on one side, and the various other nomenclature, such as “Religion and Society” and “Ethics and Society” PhD programs, on another. Whatever the case may be, it seems to me that these traditional foundational issues are increasingly being brought into conversation with concrete practical contexts (and I think this is inevitable…and for the good). The challenge for the field, however, is how to negotiate the realization that ethical issues—even very common issues—are often simply too complex and require too many specializations for one ethicist to handle adequately. Let me illustrate by looking at an apparently straightforward example:

One practical element of our everyday existence is our clothing. We get dressed every day…and y’all have done a decent job of that this morning. Yet, how many of us have really thought much about what we are wearing. Upon just a little reflection, it becomes clear that a sufficiently satisfying Christian ethic of clothing requires not only a rich biblical and theological account of the practical and symbolic purpose of clothes and financial stewardship (along with the relevant virtues and vices), but also a comprehensive understanding of cotton-farming practices, the chemical composition and production of a wide range of synthetic fibers, the manifold problems associated with dying both natural and synthetic cloth, the working conditions and labor laws in dozens of countries scattered around the world, the ever-changing global trade agreements and their effects, the multiple social functions of fashion, marketing strategies, aesthetics, consumption practices, etc, etc. Coming to grips with all of these aspects of the clothes we perfunctorily put on each morning would take several lifetimes. My point here is not that clothing is particularly unique; rather, my point is that our field is just beginning to come to grips with the complexity of the issues that face us every day.

What is increasingly needed (at least in my opinion), is a recognition that Christian ethics necessarily is a field where collaboration is ubiquitous, both in the classroom and in research [and, if we look at most influential books in the field and the publications in the *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*, this is an anomaly at present (i.e. multiple-authored volumes and articles are still the exception)…though the working groups here at the annual meetings seem to be a step in this direction]. Christian ethics cannot be a field where expertise in foundational or theoretical issues is considered sufficient or even pitted against expertise in practical or concrete issues; rather, it must be a field where these specializations mutually enrich one another. I take the recent arguments that make the case that ethics is theology to be one partial attempt at reconciling these matters. I also take the interest in various research “institutes” and “centers” among Christian ethicists to be directly and indirectly related to this these matters. Further, many of our graduate students seem to intuitively sense the need for diverse and complementary specializations in their education as they often apply to PhD programs not only for the faculty that teach ethics but also for the faculty that teach in relevant areas of specializations (e.g. faculty in environmental studies programs or in “black church studies”). That said, my sense is that until we find ways of bringing these together more synthetically—and rewarding it—we should not be surprised if “hotel management,” “business ethics,” “pastoral ethics,” etc, find that they can take care of their own affairs without recourse to what those in our field have to offer. And, this brings me to my final comment…

3. **Competing Modes of Validation**. Related to the above, I want to raise the question of how work in our field is validated. Of course, the SCE is an academic organization. But, my sense of what counts as “academic” is tilted in a direction that affirms certain forms of discourse and certain themes of discourse. At present, we find considerable overlap in Christian ethics with the fields of theology, philosophy, and the social sciences. At the same time, we find almost no overlap with the field of practical theology. I do not want to hazard my speculations—at least publicly—as to why this is the case. But, I do want to suggest an observation that I think may be relevant here…though I do so very provisionally (and you will see why in a moment). Well, here goes, and it returns to the documented hiring energy displayed by Catholic institutions: Catholic moral theology usually finds itself naturally within an overlapping academic, practical, and pastoral constituency. That is not to say that everything is daisies and butterflies among moral theologians. Rather, it is to say that moral theologians can play by the rules of the academy while also having a self-understanding (rooted in a long traditional) that is not limited by the validations or repudiations of the academy. Protestant Christian ethicists, at least as I see it, have a harder time finding a meaningful context for validation beyond the academy. I am sure there are exceptions. But, my worry is that the necessity of academic validation continues, both subtly and profoundly, to shape what “counts” or what “matters” to Protestant Christian ethicists to an excessive extent. And, if this is right, then we—as a field—need to think long and hard about what “counts” and what “matters” to us…

Well, perhaps I am wrong about this (and perhaps I’m wrong about all of the above!)…and I hope I am wrong about this. As I read it, the SCE 2020 Committee Report on “The Future of Christian Ethics” is an illuminating and ambitious report that serves as a provocative instigation for further conversation. For that I am most grateful. I have attempted to push the conversation this morning by suggesting that the future of our field also rests on how we come to grips (a) with the lack of a “center” in an increasingly large field, (b) with the increasing diversity and specialization required to do our jobs appropriately, and (c) with the ways in which the field validates the work that we do. In conclusion, I want, again, to thank the committee for taking these matters seriously, for bringing them to our attention, and for taking the time to listen. Thank you.

1. Edward Leroy Long, Jr. and Christine Gudorf, “History of the SCE” (2003) http://scethics.org/about-sce/who-we-are/history-sce. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)