

Academic Bonding and Social Concern
The Society of Christian Ethics
1959-1983

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Preface

The Society of Christian Ethics is a scholarly association that has played a uniquely meaningful role in the lives of its members. In some respects it has maintained remarkable continuities in its life since it sprang into being in 1959 from a parent group called The American Society of Seminary Professors of Christian Social Ethics in the United States and Canada. It has also undergone significant transformations. This history, which was commissioned in connection with the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Society, attempts to present as accurately as possible the details of the Society's life and to reflect on that life as an experience of community.

Not many societies take themselves seriously enough to begin collecting historical records about their activities from the first days of their life. The Society of Christian Ethics is no exception. This means that records are spotty and, in many instances, non-existent. Surprisingly, there is a much fuller account of the first year of the Society's life than of some of the subsequent early years. There are very few records of the parent group. Until five years ago there was no deliberate attempt systematically to collect the records of the Society and its activities, though random materials of various sorts (often in multiple copies) were deposited by former executive secretaries, and others, in the George Arendts Research Library at Syracuse University. In preparing a preliminary version of this history for oral delivery at the twentieth anniversary of the Society I consulted the materials at Syracuse and then found that I had personal files equally voluminous and more extensive about some matters than those to be found there. I had kept things--for reasons I never consciously articulated at the time--like a pack rat. I have been able to share duplicates of them with the Arendts Library even as it has, with the permission of the Society's Executive Board, furnished me with copies of the materials which it holds.

In writing this version of the history for publication I

have been given materials by past executive secretaries as well as by other members of the Society. After arranging those and making an inventory, I then twice conducted canvasses for missing items. The first such canvass was a general request, detailing all needed items on one mimeographed sheet that was sent out in the late spring of 1979 as a special insert in the Society's general mailing calling for papers for the forthcoming 1980 program. That effort yielded only minimal returns. In January of 1983, after bringing the index of all items up-to-date, I wrote directly to those members from whom one or more items had not been forthcoming. That produced a much more satisfactory response. (Any good development professional could have told me that only the second approach would work, but alas some of us learn only by making our own mistakes.) These two efforts boosted the holdings in the archives to over three quarters of the papers given before the Society between 1959 and 1983. In time these will be placed in the George Arendt Research Library and probably in another convenient location so that future scholars can winnow them for even more insights than has been possible in this account.

In seeking to secure missing items it did not seem appropriate to badger those who had spoken as dignitaries or as guests of the Society for their contributions years after the fact. Many of them had spoken from notes and could not have reconstructed what they said. In other cases, such as workshops and panels, it did not prove promising to try to reconstruct the presentations, many of which were also given from notes. With these exceptions an effort was made to have the resulting record relatively as full as possible. It is complete as respects the printed programs of the annual meetings and the annual budgets. It is almost complete as respects minutes of the board meetings and the annual business meetings. There is a fairly good collection of the membership rosters from year-to-year. In the case of some annual meetings we have programs on which handwritten entries indicate last-minute changes occasioned by illness, weather, or the failure of certain persons to fulfill their commitments, and in such cases an effort has been made to report the happenings as they actually took place rather than as they were originally planned.

It is, of course, the ideal of every scholar to work with the highest possible accuracy. As one not trained or accustomed to writing primary history, doing this project has made me acutely aware of the enormous difficulties involved in such an undertaking. A historian of another professional group, whose account covered a much longer time span than does this one, once said in my hearing "Never again!" While not quite as emphatic about it, I certainly

share the feeling behind the remark, and would urge any group that wants its history written at some future time to be very deliberate about collecting its records as they are produced---and, if possible, to have an archivist/historian responsible for collecting such data and reflecting on the life of the group on a continuing basis rather than asking someone to reconstruct the story after the events are forgotten or the records have been scattered.

The story as it is found in the materials which have thus been collected is made available here in a composite account which is being distributed to each and every member as economically as possible. It is with some fear and trepidation that this is sent forth, since I know that there are errors of detail that even the most careful attention has not been able to avoid. Just as the Roman Catholic church is wise in not canonizing saints until sometime after their death, perhaps prudent historians (which seem not to have the same license as journalists) do not write about others while they are still alive. I know from correspondence which has been done in connection with the project that people do not recall things with unflinching accuracy, even when they were directly involved. On some matters I have had to let documentary evidence override casual recollections. But to the extent errors remain I trust that there are none which will in any substantive way harm or damage individuals even if they do prove to be somewhat misleading or incidentally annoying.

This account covers a relatively short, and recent, period of time. It does not constitute a full account of the teaching of Christian ethics (or moral theology) during the period, nor is it intended to be an intellectual history of an academic discipline or disciplines. Katner, it is a record of the activities of a particular society during the first quarter-century of its officially constituted existence. The growth of this Society and the matters to which it gave attention in its programs does tell us something quite useful about the development of Christian ethics and/or Christian social ethics as subject matter fields and as a focus for professional engagement. While the story told here has obvious "in house" interest, much can be learned from it. It is to the credit of the officers and members of the Society that they saw the value of having such an account produced while the greater part of the necessary materials could be collected.

It is impossible to name individually all those who have given help in this undertaking. The roster of the Society itself should head the list, since without the response from those members who have been solicited for materials, asked

o recall or verify special happenings, voluntarily sent information or suggestions, voted for budget items to support the expenses of the research, and finally paid the additional assessment making publication possible, this study could never have been completed. My gratitude to each and to all of these colleagues is not diminished even though they are not listed by name.

I would acknowledge specific help given by Max Stackhouse and Joseph Allen in reading large parts of the draft at different stages. Both caught errors of detail and perception. Thomas Ogletree was instrumental in supporting me in this undertaking--both as president of the Society during the year when most of the writing was done and as dean of the school that allowed me to use a good part of a sabbatical for this project.

The word processing department of Drew University has helped enormously in the preparation of the finished product. It worked with me to move both from rough copy to good copy and from good copy to camera-ready copy. This work was underwritten by the University, through the funds designated for scholarly productivity of the Theological School Faculty. I thank Mary Stringham in particular for her seemingly inexhaustible patience and skill in using a highly complicated machine acquired just prior to beginning work on this project. I appreciate help in copy editing given by Ellen Chmiel, a graduate student in Religion and Society at Drew. My wife, Grace Cumming Long, assisted in numerous ways. The Society is indebted to the *Journal of Religious Ethics*, and its editor, James Turner Johnson, for agreeing to publish this history.

E.L.L., Jr.

Drew Forest
Summer 1984

Part One

Beginnings