



*Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Religion*

## **Setting the Context**

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**Part of JRER Special Issue:  
*Got Ethics?***

***Envisioning and Evaluating the Future of Our Guild and Discipline,***  
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In light of the Society of Christian Ethics/ 21<sup>st</sup> Century and 2020 Initiatives, several ad hoc committees and working groups have examined the fate and future of both the Society and the field of Christian Ethics. The stated purposes of these initiatives and their correlative task forces were to think about a new era that is ostensibly different from the state of the discipline of

Christian Ethics and the demographics of the Society in the past. In effect, each initiative was charged to address the evolving needs of our field, particularly giving attention to our mission, membership, meeting, media, management and mass appeal. There has also been considerable attention paid to our relevance in an academy and society where underrepresented groups of color are no longer minorities in the demographic composition of the United States. Further, numerous discussions have focused on the shifting dynamics of a global and post-secular age. Each initiative therefore chose to focus its attention on the practices of the Society in order to expand our ethical conversations with ethicists in other cultures, traditions, and institutional settings. Finally, each initiative executed its own inventory and recommendations to the Board and membership emerged.

The “Got Ethics?” pre-conference workshop, consisting of the roundtable discussion (much of which is evidenced in this special issue), is an effort to make good on the hard work of those initiatives and the good intentions of the SCE board. Herein these four scholars revisit the implications that a diverse demographic and discipline as well as the developing global context may pose for the future of our scholarship and society.

### **Setting the Context**

Let’s face it, much of the academy is a world driven more by commerce than community, sportsmanship than scholarship, rank than respect, publications than personhood, pedigree than personality, political correctness than correct politics, discipline than discipleship, tenure than

tenacity, and yes, efficiency than ethics. Naturally then, institutional standing, interpersonal relations and internal conflicts become daunting and detrimental to any scholarly organization's morale and the living out of its highest ideals. Ours is no exception. Having the strategic plan and skill set to resolve our conflicts effectively are the biggest challenges in any institution's road to success. The state of theological education in general and the field of ethics in particular are at an all-time low. We've all seen the statistics and have felt the implications for the viability of the profession. Mainline churches are under attack while seminary trained clergy are being told, "Honey, you've shrunk the church!" or our divinity students query what good is it to study what they cannot preach or take out loans and go into debt in a religion or field that is in the world but not of the world. The 21<sup>st</sup> century and the 2020 initiatives have sought practical strategies for such dissonance with aims of resolving what is at least critical if not dire.

On the first day of every ethics course I teach, I always begin with the statement, "Ethics begins where problems start." By using case studies that are often "ripped from the headlines," I seek to have my students encounter these scenarios *in media res*. In other words, my intention is to immerse them in the messiness of ethics rather than allow them the safe distance that presumed objectivity and theoretical abstraction usually afford. While asking my students to engage this epistemological journey of metaethics in a wholehearted fashion, finding a way to make what's abstract accessible while bearing moral witness, my task is to allow them a living laboratory in the work of ethics that acknowledges that there is no such thing as safe space or objectivity. The panel this evening seeks to do this same task by craving vulnerability and using their insight in order to offer constructive feedback and give real-lived texture to the perennial

issues and social ills that plague our Society and society at large. We have realized, as I'm sure you have as well, our scholarship won't save us and our canon doesn't make us righteous. Yet the question, "GOT ETHICS?" is not merely figurative, but quite literal and has everything to do with the mind of our discipline, the spirit of our faith and the soul of our community. Ours is the task to take such a question seriously.