



*Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Religion*

## **Ordering Our Steps, Engendering Ethics, and Race-ing Forward:**

**The Promise and Peril of Organizations and Human Development**

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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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When viewed in tandem, the work of both the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and the 2020 initiatives have sought to find practical strategies to resolve what is at least critical if not dire for our Society of Christian Ethics. The ingenious task of these two initiatives, and dare I say, our society is its

mandate to enable religious scholars and faith leaders to discover the means to describe, analyze, and construct liberating ethics that seek to unmask and debunk sub-rosa morality within the academy, church, and society. Integral to this process is a critical reassessment of our own guild since its emergence and now with regards to its relevance within the academy, the humanities, religious studies and theological education, the Church universal and the larger society of which we are all a part. As both a member and an officer within the SCE, it has been my hope to illustrate, translate and transform the impact that our organization has had and can have on the broader spectrum of our society and the academy. Towards this end, I see the future work of the SCE as vital to “become the change that we seek” to use Gandhi’s words. This is a three-fold task. First, we must explore the development of Christian ethics as a continuation of the liberation ethics project as stated in Luke 4:18 of being appointed and anointed thinkers of faith who seek to have our work “to bring good news to the poor,” “proclaim release to the captives,” recovery of sight to the blind,” and “to let the oppressed go free.” Second, we must name and subsequently act on those obstacles and forces that undermine our task. And lastly, we must offer a glimpse of the future direction of Christian ethics as well as American theological education by linking such explorations to the wide array of crises presently afflicting the globe.

The *raison d'être* of our Society is to promote scholarly work in Christian ethics that addresses social, economic, political and cultural problems in an effort not only to encourage and improve the profession as a whole but also ultimately to address the national and global contexts and problems that impede various human rights and social justice issues. Simply put, ours is an enterprise that must seek to further human development intracommunally as a Society before we

can have any real impact in changing the larger. As both the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and 2020 committees explicitly stated, we must explore the current status of and future prospects for the field of "Christian ethics." This must be done with an eye to not only reporting the findings but also to better inform and guide the actions of the Society, now and in years to come by offering tentative practical recommendations regarding how best to commit the resources of the Society to the present encouragement, and future cultivation, of the field of Christian ethics in the academy, for the churches, and amidst the public. By way of illustration, the concept of "development" herein cuts across many levels. It refers to macro issues (such as the viability of the field and the growth of our student and professorial base), as much as it refers to meso problems (teaching and hiring best practices), or to micro problems (such as professional development). All three levels — macro, meso, and micro, are interwoven. And at all levels, a metanarrative abounds that the younger, more feminine and darker one happens to be, the more likely they are pushed to the margins within our field as students and scholars. This is a fact not only within our Society but also within the larger society, and, in turn, it has proven to profoundly affect our collective development. Thus we must continue to address the links between the promotion of social change associated with our implicit biases and develop sobering strategies to aid us in this challenge.

When members of a guild such as ours come to annual meetings such as the one we are about to convene, quite often the conversation, whether formal or informal, will lead someone to comment and share their opinions about the crisis of our field. Despite our different alma maters and varied research interests and specialized subfields, it is quite important to remember that we

are a gathered assembly of scholars who have been trained in our field of inquiry in accordance to necessarily high standards of research, rigor, and rationality. Yet, when it comes to the matter of the contemporary fate and potential future of theological education and ethics in particular, many of these members will cast aside their dedication to facts and fair-mindedness in favor of wallowing in their fears and frustrations about the deep-seated perception of future uncertainty that challenges all they once knew and held dear. Yet, in order to give a clearer, more accurate sense of the requisite transformations proposed for the Society of Christian Ethics, we have to attend to the fact that our fears are inextricably linked to our implicit biases if we have any hope of catching up and attending to the changing nature of the nation.

Without question, the quantitative as well as qualitative dimensions of diversity in the contemporary landscape of religion and theology as a professional realm need to be dissected and discussed in order to help make sense of not just what's going on but what's going wrong. Sadly, despite the projections of the United States eventually becoming a "majority-minority" nation, we can still witness people of color continuing to be underrepresented within theological and religious education at all levels of higher education nationwide.

In a 2010 address, ATS president Daniel Aleshire argued that apparent changes in both the patterns and expectations of denominational structure, Christian identities, religious participation, and religious pluralism has to be treated as a reality. In response, Aleshire offers suggestions for attending to our changing religious climate, including broadening theological education at the baccalaureate level, incorporating more technology in theological education

practices, and paying closer attention to non-traditional education partners.<sup>1</sup> Our numbers are dropping by 10% every four years. In 2011, reports indicated that Asian Americans, Blacks, and Hispanics accounted for 7%, 13%, and 5% of the total enrolled respectively. In the starker terms possible, Hispanics are particularly underrepresented amongst non-white racial ethnic groups, since they currently represent 20% of the U.S. population between age 25-29, and 11% of the population of individuals aged 30 and older (AFT, 2010) yet our institutional homes and professional guilds reflect virtually none of this demographic presence.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, other complexities materialize when data is disaggregated along lines of race, ethnicity, and gender. In a country and church that is more and more female and dark, it must be noted that: white men are the clear majority in holding posts in our field; women are minoritized within the field across race but white women outpace women of color; and white people make up 80% of full-time faculty positions, while majority of the adjunct positions are held by the younger, women and people of color.

Long story short, despite the projections of a more diverse society, the data continues to reflect significant generational, gender and racial disparities within higher and theological education that, in turn, lead to a diminished pool of potentially diverse future colleagues and fellow members.

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Aleshire, “The Future has Arrived: Changing Theological Education in a Changed World” (paper presented at the Association of Theological Schools [ATS]/Commission on Accreditation [COA] Biennial Meeting. Montreal, QC, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Sybrina Y. Atwaters, “The Cultivation of Scholars of Color within Theological Education” (Decatur, GA: Fund for Theological Education, 2012), 7.

Furthermore, the lack of faculty of color and the reluctance of some professors to enter into interracial mentoring and / or networking relationships creates environments of isolation for students of color as well as additional cultural demands for faculty of color at our academic institutions. This will have a potentially negative impact on the relevance of the SCE moving forward.<sup>3</sup>

The viability of our field and future of the Society of Christian Ethics necessitates that we understand that our development is inextricably linked to the human development of the individuals that make up the future of our S/society. But obviously this should be understood as a process, not a product. Needless to say, societies should change, and for the better if they are going to face the future in a confident rather than a contrarian fashion. Our efforts must strive towards growth and change if this organization seeks to have a fruitful institutional life and greater social relevance. Conversely, to remain stagnant and static ensures that failure will be our only option. Development theory aims at explaining both processes. Development practice intends to provide tools that can be applied either to entire societies or specific communities. Such interventions are intended to move communities or societies from a situation in which they are believed to be worse off to a situation in which they are assumed to be better off.

Why must this task of human development and conflict resolution fall on us uniquely as a scholarly guild of ethicists? Well, let us look to our own development. While many would trace the development of ethics from Aristotle and the *Nicomachean Ethics*, through Walter Rauschenbusch and others in the Social Gospel movement, I believe it is more appropriate in this

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

moment to look to our contemporary American context to name Reinhold Niebuhr as evidence to our present *why* crisis. Niebuhr is widely acknowledged to be the father of what we call social ethics in the American academy not because he ever held a doctoral degree in the field or because his original academic post was in the field of Social Ethics, because neither of these is the case. Rather, Niebuhr is seen by many as the “patron saint” of social ethics because he fervently “sought to discern the social meaning of [Christian] faith.”<sup>4</sup>

While he eventually refined and canonized the field, his formation as an ethicist actually took shape in the fulfilling of his call to become a minister in a small congregation among Detroit’s disinherited in Detroit. Startled by the slums and the perilous living conditions of Detroit and troubled by the demoralizing effects of industrialism on Detroit workers in the early twentieth century, Niebuhr was overwhelmed by the inhumane conditions and social practices of people who had been abandoned by Western civilization and blinded by Christian idealism. As a result, Niebuhr modeled a social ethic by becoming an outspoken critic of government, market, and church. He transformed his pulpit into a social platform – and expounded a gospel that was both socially effective by forcefully advocating “the equalization of living standards” and theologically sound by rejecting Christian ideals that were insincere and morally confusing.

In his book *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, Niebuhr insisted on the necessity of politics in the struggle for social justice because of the sinfulness of human nature, that is, the egotism of individuals and groups. He described the limitations of reason in its efforts to solve social injustice by moral and rational means, "since reason is always the servant of interest in a social

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<sup>4</sup> Gary Dorrien, *Social Ethics in the Making: Interpreting an American Tradition* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 238.

situation.<sup>5</sup> This is his critique of liberal Christian theology, which strongly believes in the rational capacity of humans to make them moral, and he accepts this vulnerability as our human reality. With his social ethic of pragmatic socialism, Niebuhr preached, taught, and wrote about the injustice of humanity and the need for people to unmask the sub-rosa morality of his day and tear down the systems that increased the injustice in the world. Even when that tearing down necessitated reflection, confession, and correction within his own life, he believed in the necessity of politics. Moreover, he was constantly working on making his research relevant in the public square without fear of recrimination. Wherever he saw evil he felt that opposition, even by force, even by Christians, was necessary. And this force, this disruptive ethic if you will, this moral agency afforded to us in the form of free will as a gift of God, would empower people to rid the world of the human sin of lording power over others. Feminist liberationist ethicists, womanist ethicists, mujerista ethicists and ethicists of color took up this mantle to continue this work but many of these scholars who have raced forward to engender the true meaning of ethics have been marginalized and muted in their quest to esteem our field. Was it the white heteropatriarchal privilege of this scholar-activist (who never had nor earned a PhD) that gave him the moral agency and cultural capital to achieve the successes he had? Is it the forces of tripartite oppression that keep us from hearing and heeding the scholarship and cries of those women and scholars of color among us that echo and perhaps trump the work of Niebuhr? These aren't rhetorical questions. They are urgent questions that call us to an earnest look at ourselves as Christian ethicists. The 21<sup>st</sup> century and 2020 initiatives knew this and reported as much and

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<sup>5</sup> Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics*, 2<sup>nd</sup>. Ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), xiv-xv.

we cannot wait for another initiative to arise to come to the same conclusions. We must act now before the door closes on our field, our churches, and our own lifetimes and legacies. This we do in an effort to order our steps, engender the field of ethics, while race-ing forward to what we hope will be a more fruitful enterprise.