

# RELIGIOUS ETHICS AS A SOCIAL PRACTICE

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## ABSTRACT

The *Journal of Religious Ethics* (JRE) was established at a particular moment in the United States in the early 1970s. This article investigates how that moment—in the institutional milieu of academic theology and religious studies in which the (JRE) emerged—influenced its founding. It does this through attention to three main sources: (1) the original charter and bylaws of the JRE, (2) publications from the JRE and other scholarly outlets in the period, and (3) a collection of interviews with scholars who occupied editorial roles in the first 10 years of the life of the journal. The article suggests that the JRE's early period was driven by three key forces: the emergence of Christian ethics as a field of academic theology, deepening engagement with academic philosophy among students of Christian ethics, and growing attention to the pedagogical requirements of increasingly pluralist tertiary educational environments. In conclusion, I describe my own place in this history, asking how the dynamics around the founding of the JRE shape my participation in the practice enacted in its pages.

KEYWORDS: *history, moral philosophy, tradition, Christian ethics, religious ethics, religious studies, pluralism, bioethics, just war, civil rights movement*

What *is* religious ethics? One kind of description would provide a *methodological* point of view on its techniques and purposes. For example, some scholars characterize religious ethics as a method of inquiry considering the relationship between religion and morality (see Schweiker and Clairmont 2020, 9). Another kind of description would offer a more *formal* point of view on its scope. The current JRE “Aims and Scope,” for instance, describes the journal’s emphases on comparative, foundational, and historical studies of religious ethics.<sup>1</sup> While reflection on method is essential to any intellectual enterprise, and formal definitions can be helpful for describing the lay of the land, methodological and formal descriptions

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<sup>1</sup> “Founded in 1973, the *Journal of Religious Ethics* is committed to publishing the very best scholarship in religious ethics, to fostering new work in neglected areas, and to stimulating exchange on significant issues. Emphasizing comparative religious ethics, foundational conceptual and methodological issues in religious ethics, and historical studies of influential figures and texts, each issue contains independent essays, commissioned articles, and a book review essay, as well as a *Letters, Notes, and Comments* section. Published primarily for scholars working in ethics, religious studies, history of religions, and theology, the journal is also of interest to scholars working in related fields such as philosophy, history, social and political theory, and literary studies” (“[Overview](#),” *Journal of Religious Ethics*).

JRE 51.3:386–405. © 2023 The Author. *Journal of Religious Ethics* published by Wiley Periodicals LLC on behalf of Journal of Religious Ethics, Inc.

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alone are incomplete. For religious ethics is also a *social practice*, a way of doing scholarship that emerged in history among a specific group of human actors. To describe religious ethics as a social practice is to see it as “a shared pattern of behavior that is conducted according to norms,” and shifting through time, making it open to “transformation, novelty, reform, or even revolution” (Bush 2014, 3–4).<sup>2</sup> Religious ethics, like any field, has a story of emergence that was influenced by the particular persons among whom, and the contexts within which it developed.

Social practices have histories, and quite often, knowing these histories can help us to understand what we are up to in the present and help us discern productive future transformations. Here, at the JRE’s 50th anniversary, I want to tell one piece of the history of religious ethics, as a way of redescribing religious ethics as a social practice. This description will focus on the journal’s founding. For those who founded the JRE and nurtured it in its first 10 years or so, from approximately 1973–1983, what motivated them? Why were they committed to developing religious ethics as a field of study? What did they take it to be? And how did the institutions they were part of and the social and political world in which they lived shape those motivations? Because the founders were motivated by the problems and possibilities of their particular intellectual, institutional, and political contexts, some of their reasons for (and ways of) engaging in religious ethics will be different from what ours are now.

One of the central aims articulated at the beginning of the JRE—that it would cultivate a rigorous, interdisciplinary conversation on “the critical issues of our moment”—cannot be captured in either methodological or formal descriptions alone.<sup>3</sup> “The critical issues of our moment” are always in flux, emerging in history. Where religious ethics as a field of study was deeply shaped by important public controversies in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s over war, race, and medical care—issues that are still obviously critical—religious ethics as a social practice may be less prepared to face issues that seem most pressing now: the fragility

<sup>2</sup> Molly Farneth describes social practices slightly differently: they “involve multiple people who care about the practice and about the routines and rules that govern it.” These practices “belong to groups of people, all of whom have some stake in how they are enacted.” Farneth suggests both Alasdair MacIntyre and Sally Haslanger “share an understanding of practices as learned activities, transmitted from experienced practitioners to inexperienced practitioners through formal and informal education and habituation” (Farneth 2023, 26–27). Jeffrey Stout describes the practice of democratic citizenship as “a *social* practice because the ends it pursues and the means it employs involve building up human relationships of certain kinds” (Stout 2010, 93). Stephen Bush, Farneth, and Stout all offer different descriptions of what makes an activity a social practice. For the purposes of this article, religious ethics is a social practice in the sense that it is (1) a shared activity, (2) conducted according to norms, (3) carried out by a particular group, in which (4) each member has a stake and the ability to (5) follow and contest the norms that make up the practice. This set of facts means that social practices are (6) always being transformed, and—in their best performances—(7) building up human relationships that are characterized by fellowship and justice.

<sup>3</sup> The quotation comes from an editorial in the first issue of the JRE, authored by its first editor, Charles Reynolds, and I discuss it further in the section on “Pedagogy for pluralism and emerging controversy” (Reynolds 1973).

of democracy, the related extraordinary growth of economic inequality, and the rapidly changing climates of Earth. Studying the history of the social practice enacted in these pages can help us cultivate self-awareness about where we come from and how that history shapes us. This awareness, in turn, will contribute to cultivating the rigorous, interdisciplinary conversation about the critical issues of *our* moment that is already ongoing in the JRE.

To investigate this story, I have relied on three kinds of sources. First, I have—with thanks to the JRE's current editors, Diana Fritz Cates and Irene Oh—secured digital copies of key historical documents, especially the original charter and by-laws of the JRE from 1978. Second, I have read a wide variety of publications in the JRE and other scholarly outlets from the period, as well as later accounts of the period. And third, I have conducted interviews with scholars who occupied editorial roles in the first 10 years of the life of the journal, asking them about how they understood its founding. I invited everyone who was listed as having an editorial role in the first issue, as well as Associate Editors through 1978 and General Editors through 1997.<sup>4</sup>

Four of those invited generously agreed to speak with me for an hour over Zoom in April and May of 2022: Glenn Graber, James F. Childress, Ronald M. Green, and James T. Johnson. In semi-structured interviews, I asked these scholars how they had learned about scholarship in religious ethics, what had motivated their commitment to the JRE, and what institutional and social forces they saw shaping its emergence. I recorded and transcribed our conversations, and I have synthesized what I learned about where the journal came from.

## 1. Forces on the Founding of the JRE—Far More than *Schempp*

In the 1960s, there was a religious studies boom in the United States. New departments were founded at colleges and universities across the country. One popular explanation for this growth attributes it to a decision by the Supreme Court from 1963, *Abington vs Schempp*.<sup>5</sup> The decision distinguished the teaching “of” religion from teaching “about” religion and gave a new social license to teaching “about” religion in public contexts. Although the legal decision was about teaching religion in public schools, not higher education, the decision had a cultural life beyond its legal significance.

As Sarah Imhoff argues, however, the *Schempp* story works better as a creation myth than it does as a historical explanation for the institutional growth of religious studies: religious studies was growing already before *Schempp*, even within state institutions. While *Schempp* likely helped to support the ongoing growth

<sup>4</sup> Sadly, all of the founding editors have died, including Charlie Reynolds—the much-beloved founder—in 2017 (Hauerwas 2017). In what follows, I refer to the entire generation that nurtured the first decade of the JRE as “founders.” When I intend the smaller group of founding editors—Charles Reynolds, Arthur Dyck, Frederick Carney, and Roland Delattre—I indicate this by writing “founding editors.”

<sup>5</sup> For examples of the use of *Schempp* as an explanation for the boom, see Imhoff 2016, 467.

of religious studies, by providing an explanation that could be used to justify the study of religion to administrators, it was only one of a number of factors that contributed to the growth of religious studies in the period (Imhoff 2016).

Religious ethics emerged alongside this religious studies boom, and for that reason, it may seem intuitive to tie the emergence of religious ethics to *Schempp*. Indeed, one of my interviewees, Ron Green, did suggest *Schempp* is part of the story of the emergence of religious ethics. According to this view, the post-*Schempp* standard for the study of religion emerged in the decade before the JRE was founded. In this context, new PhDs trained in (mostly Christian) ethics at institutions that were largely “Protestant enclaves,” as Jim Childress described Yale in the period, needed to narrate their place in the post-*Schempp* religious studies paradigm as they took up jobs in the new programs springing up around the country.<sup>6</sup> To explain themselves to the rest of the universities they were joining and the collaborators they sought in other departments, they wanted to nurture a new field—religious ethics—as distinct from the field in which most of them had been trained—Christian ethics. In this new field, they would teach “about” religious ethics from a variety of traditions, eschewing the teaching “of” Christian ethics. This professionalization, under the influence of *Schempp* and within the context of the emergence of new religious studies programs, is one of the factors that contributed to the founding of the JRE.

Inspired by Imhoff’s argument about the complex social and political forces at play in the founding of religious studies, however, I have found that the story of the JRE’s emergence involves more intellectual and cultural forces than the *Schempp* story accounts for. The journal’s founders were responding to forces from at least three other directions. First, “Christian ethics”—as an intellectual project carried out in institutions under that name—had only emerged relatively recently, and the founders of the JRE were responding to and participating as scholars invested in that emerging project. Second, partly in response to intellectual shortcomings they saw in some forms of “Christian ethics,” the founders were committed to nurturing engagement with academic moral philosophy and other disciplines. Third, the founders had been educated mostly in Protestant institutions in a period when diversity among students with respect to religion, race, and gender was very low. Their education had mainly happened among white Protestant men. But as they finished PhDs and began teaching, they found themselves addressing more diverse student bodies. “Christian ethics” as the pedagogical project in which they had been educated seemed to make less sense in these changing contexts.

<sup>6</sup> James Childress took up editorship of the JRE book series in 1974, joined as “Co-editor” of the journal with Reynolds in 1978, and was specified as “Focus Editor” alongside Reynolds as “General Editor” in 1979. He said, “I finished at Yale in 1968, and Yale Graduate School [in religious studies] was largely a Protestant enclave. The first Catholic PhD in religious studies was probably Al Jonsen, who received his degree in 1967” (Childress 2022). Lisa Cahill has recently written about “Catholic doctoral students flooding historically Protestant divinity schools in the wake of the Second Vatican Council” (Childress et al. 2022, 4).

### 1.1 *Christian Ethics*

The first of the forces at play at the founding of the JRE was the setting in which “religious ethics” emerged. The founders were responding to and often themselves involved as Christian ethicists. But where the *Schempp*-inflected story might assume that Christian ethics was a long-standing scholarly focus in US American educational institutions, Christian ethics had only emerged under that name relatively recently. The Society of Christian Ethics (SCE) began informally in the 1950s as an Association of Seminary Professors of Christian Social Ethics and was founded officially in 1959. (In 1960, its original membership roll included 116 men and 1 woman). The SCE was one of the key institutions in the founding of the JRE. Jim Johnson, who took over from Charlie Reynolds as general editor in 1981, said that “the Society of Christian Ethics was really the frame within which the JRE got its start” (Johnson 2022). Nearly all of those involved in the early period of the JRE were SCE members. The JRE was the first scholarly journal to emerge from that new organization. It held meetings at the SCE, but it did not become the SCE’s official publication (Long and Gudorf 2003). There was some tension between the aims of the JRE’s founders and the goals of the SCE membership more broadly.

This tension in the early period of the JRE came up multiple times in the interviews that I conducted. Glenn Graber served as “Editorial Assistant” then “Assistant Editor” and then “Associate Editor” in the first 5 years of the JRE. When I spoke to him about his involvement, I realized that while many of those involved in the early life of the journal shared a common intellectual milieu, having come from PhD programs in religion and theology especially at Harvard and Yale, Graber would have a different point of view.<sup>7</sup> He received a PhD in Philosophy from the University of Michigan, and he became involved in the JRE through his friendship with Charlie Reynolds at the University of Tennessee (UT) at Knoxville. Reynolds and Graber were both hired at UT into their first jobs. Reynolds joined the new Religious Studies department the year after Graber joined Philosophy. Graber identified himself as having come from an academic

<sup>7</sup> One helpfully schematic account of the similarities and differences between Yale, Harvard, and Union Theological Seminary in the period appears in Hauerwas’s contribution to a recent volume on *Ethics and Advocacy: Bridges and Boundaries* (2022). That volume is focused on a question that arises in a much different mode in Beliso-De Jesús 2018. There, Aisha Beliso-De Jesús argues that the distinction between “scholar” and “practitioner” in religious studies “serves to maintain and naturalize white privilege in the study of religion.” Beliso-De Jesús’s methodological proposal suggests resisting identity-based comparative approaches to the study of religion and committing to purposefully transformative scholarly agendas. Work like Beliso-De Jesús’s demonstrates that contemporary work on “ethics” happens across the interdisciplinary field of religious studies and outside of it. That is, scholarship on ethics is not in any way confined to the tradition of scholarly religious ethics whose parochial history I am sketching part of here. Similarly, there are many ways of doing religious ethics outside of academic communities, for example among lay religious communities unconnected to universities. This observation is just another way of saying that the founders of the JRE were socially and culturally located within a particular milieu that this article aims to describe.

philosophy background rather than from one of the big religion programs in the East, and he said he had “always been pretty much an outsider” to the JRE.

Valuing this outsider perspective, I was interested in how he understood the JRE’s intellectual significance. When I asked him about his impression of the purpose of the journal, he immediately described “some tension within the Society of Christian Ethics, about focusing on Christian ethics, or [instead] focusing more broadly” (Graber 2022). Graber described the journal having been started by a small group of scholars drawn mostly from the ranks of the SCE, a collection of recent PhDs who were the “Young Turks within that group.” They were committed to the journal as a way to develop “a wider conversation than the largely theological school conversations in the SCE.” He took the founders to be hoping to transform their field for the better “by bringing a larger group into the conversations including philosophy and worldwide voices” (Graber 2022). In this, Graber emphasized the intention to deepen engagement with philosophy, and, to a lesser extent, to cultivate work on religious ethics in traditions that had not been represented in—as Childress put the point—“Protestant enclaves.”

In addition to coming together within the SCE, the founders may also have been responding to the practice of other Christian ethicists whom they understood as taking religious convictions for granted when thinking about practical ethical concerns. This was a stance they had theological and ethical reasons to be concerned about. Charlie Reynolds wrote in 1970 in *The Journal of Religion* that making conscience primary in Christian ethics, through a “naively mythical understanding of the place of God” in moral decision-making “leads by default to a sanctioning of the given social status quo in which Christians happen to be living” (Reynolds 1970b, 156). Reynolds was an activist against the Vietnam War, and he was looking for a way of doing ethics that could get more critical purchase on his culture.<sup>8</sup> He was also work-

<sup>8</sup> Glenn Graber told me the story of Charlie Reynolds’s arrest for disturbing a religious service on campus at University of Tennessee, Knoxville. “Billy Graham came to Knoxville to do a campaign. He invited Richard Nixon one night. It was shortly after the Kent State situation. And people were saying, oh, ‘Richard Nixon could not go on a college campus. That would be unacceptable.’ So there was a lot of attention to Billy Graham coming to town and Richard Nixon. A bunch of students were going to boycott the program. I told my students I was not going to go, because I could not believe that Billy Graham would let Richard Nixon get political. He would insist that he just say hello and say some something innocuous. But a group of people went including Charlie, and they were saying if he got political, they were going to protest. So when Richard Nixon was introduced, and stood up and began saying, ‘well, see here I am on a college campus. Now you can see that they love me on campuses,’ they all got up and began to protest, and the police swept in and arrested them. And he was charged with the crime of disrupting a religious service. And his defense was, ‘well, it wasn’t a religious service at the time I disrupted. We sat quietly until it became political. And at that moment, is when we interrupted it.’ And the judge would not entertain that distinction. If any of it was a religious service, it was all a religious service. I wrote to Billy Graham and said ‘you need to say that was not religious talk they were interrupting that was political talk,’ but he never responded. So Charlie was convicted and fined, I think it was \$20 or something. The jury had to find him guilty, because the judge said they had to, but when they went to set that fine, they set it at almost nothing” (Graber 2022). The story is also told in Hauerwas 2017; McCutcheon 2017.

ing in a period when conscience had become a key political category in the United States (Cajka 2021). And he had Christian theological reasons, outlined in *The Journal of Religion*, to think that ethical inquiry should be rational, by which I take him to have meant that it should adhere to rigorous forms of reasoning and argumentation.

This commitment to certain standards of reasoning had everyday, practical implications in the editorial work of the early life of the journal. Graber described a distinction in JRE editorial practice between articles that were argued and those that were “homiletic.” As the resident philosopher, Graber endorsed publishing those articles that had a thesis, had a systematic way of presenting and pursuing the thesis, and considered counterarguments to the thesis. Those that adopted what he called a “homiletic style” usually failed to give arguments, and Graber did not endorse their publication.

Thus the founding of the JRE took place within the new field of Christian ethics, among a collection of people who aimed to cultivate forms of rigorous argumentation that would not take religious conviction for granted. In another article from 1970 on trends in Christian ethics in the 1960s, Reynolds wrote that “many works published in Christian ethics are truncated and incomplete, frequently even confused” and that it “appears to be an exceedingly unsystematic discipline” (Reynolds 1970a, 329). The alternative he offered was an ideal that could “combine solid theoretical analysis with participation in struggles for social justice” (1970a, 330). There seems to have been some dissatisfaction among the founders with the forms of reasoning they saw being practiced in Christian ethics and a desire to raise the standards of theoretical analysis and rational argumentation for their field.

## 1.2 *Academic Philosophy at Harvard and Yale*

Thus, the second important force on the founding of the JRE, as Graber’s involvement and his account of its early period suggest, was ongoing scholarship in academic philosophy, which the founders thought could offer important theoretical resources to the developing field of Christian ethics. At the same time, the founders had some dissatisfactions with academic philosophy as well, and many theoretical disagreements, including whether and how philosophy should shape religious ethics.

In the 1950s, academic moral philosophy had often focused on analytic metaethics, to an extent that it was seen to have very little significance for practical ethical questions like those that were most pressing in the period, controversies about civil rights, war, and medical care (including, perhaps especially, abortion).<sup>9</sup> Having decided against pursuing a PhD in philosophy on these grounds, Ron Green (an original member of the editorial board of the JRE) enrolled in the Harvard PhD program

<sup>9</sup> In a different national context, this was a problem with British analytic moral philosophy that was also described and resisted, in various ways, by a quartet of philosophers and friends who attended Oxford during the Second World War: Iris Murdoch, Philippa Foot, Elizabeth Anscombe, and Mary Midgley (Cumhaill and Wiseman 2022).

in religious ethics. Not having much formal religious background, he had been attracted to the study of ethics by a freshman seminar at Brown University on the Hebrew Bible that gripped his interest because of “the concern with social justice and humanistic treatment of the vulnerable” (Green 2022). Leaving Brown, during his first year at Harvard, Green recounted, he took his first graduate course in ethics, but almost decided to leave the field because this course “was all metaethics of the 50s type on the meaning of moral terms.” (The course was with Roderick Firth, who wrote “Ethical Absolutism and the Ideal Observer” in 1952.) Green’s frustration with this course was evident in his voice: “it couldn’t be applied to anything, it didn’t address any practical questions of ethics at all” (Green 2022). In his second year, however, he found John Rawls, and Rawls turned out to be a key influence on many in the founding period. Green said,

I walked into John Rawls’s course. And as I tell friends, it’s as though the light suddenly got turned on. All of a sudden, I was dealing with somebody who himself stated that he was not concerned with the meaning of moral terms, but the practical use of moral reasoning in the matter of social justice and economics.

For Green, Rawls offered a philosophical argument for the ethics he had gone to graduate school to study and an example of a philosopher who was also concerned with “social justice and the humanistic treatment of the vulnerable.”<sup>10</sup>

Green and others at Harvard in the period, including Reynolds, were gripped by what they saw as the ability of Rawls’s theory to be applied to practical matters of grave concern in their political culture. They followed along as Rawls revised *A Theory of Justice*, receiving a mimeographed copy of the new draft each year. Stanley Hauerwas has reported that Reynolds also made Rawls’s work available as it developed to students, like Hauerwas, then at Yale (Hauerwas 1998, 59, 2017, 214).

More broadly, in my interview with Childress he described “a lot of ferment” among students in Christian Ethics at Yale and in Religion and Society at Harvard, all doing work “in what we were beginning to call religious ethics.” Not all those involved in the JRE were as put off by Firth as Green was. Indeed, Reynolds wrote a dissertation about the theological version of Firth’s ideal observer theory. And not all those disgruntled with analytic metaethics were attracted to Rawls. Jeffrey Stout, a doctoral student at Princeton when the JRE began, was more interested in pragmatism, Wittgenstein, and Hegel’s critique of Kant. Later, James Turner Johnson insisted that the philosophical mode of religious ethics in development failed to represent the importance of history within Jewish and Christian ethics (Johnson 1979). Still, it was a period they all found exciting, and even students with fundamental theoretical disagreements found common cause in the effort to describe the new scholarly practice of

<sup>10</sup> John Rawls is not often interpreted as a spiritual exemplar, but one fascinating recent article treats Rawls’s “original position” as a spiritual exercise, contributing to recent “‘cross-tradition’ theorizing across the Continental and Analytic divide in political theory” (Lefebvre 2021, 8).



“religious ethics.” Students met to share work in a “Yale-Harvard colloquium.” Childress discussed the way that students at Yale were pushing Yale faculty, especially perhaps James Gustafson, into engagement with research that was going on in Anglo-American analytic philosophy.<sup>11</sup> It was, Childress said, a “heyday” of ethical theory.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, many early proponents of the JRE saw themselves as promoting a mode of ethical inquiry that would be both philosophically serious and invested in practical reasoning about pressing social and political controversies. At the same time, the space they opened up was not ideologically univocal. It was a space of contestation about how to think rigorously about religion, ethics, and “the critical issues of our moment.”

### 1.3 *Pedagogy for Pluralism and Emerging Controversy*

The third force on those who founded the JRE was their encounter with new pedagogical environments. Leaving their PhD programs at (especially) Harvard and Yale, they found themselves teaching in a different educational environment—a more pluralist one—than the largely Protestant educational culture in which their mentors had come of age.<sup>13</sup> The founders of the JRE were, for the most part, early career scholars who had pursued PhDs at Harvard and Yale in the 1960s. They then found their way into jobs in religion departments that had emerged across the United States during the religious studies boom of the 1950s and 1960s. Working in these environments in the 1970s, as more Catholic, Jewish, and gender and racially diverse students joined educational institutions that had been dominated by white Protestant men for their preceding histories, the founding generation of the JRE learned to teach ethics in classrooms that were growing more diverse than the ones in which they had been educated.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Another view on this period specifically at Yale and its importance in the development of bioethics can be found in Shulman and Fins 2022. For a long history of religion at Harvard, including a very brief mention of the founding of the JRE, see G. H. Williams 2014.

<sup>12</sup> Childress said, “looking back on it, one can think about that period in the 70s, with the publication of Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, with [Robert] Nozick’s work, with the emergence then of some counter communitarian work *et cetera, et cetera*, as a kind of heyday of sorts, of that kind of theoretical reflection, with a lot of criticisms and modifications and developments later” (2022).

<sup>13</sup> Childress said, “A lot of us were just coming out with PhDs and starting in public institutions. That’s another important part of the institutional context, because several programs developed around the same time—Indiana, University of Virginia, Florida State, Santa Barbara, and Tennessee, and so forth. And so that helped to shift the context for thinking about and approaching these matters” (2022).

<sup>14</sup> One important factor in changing demographics was the GI Bill, which diversified college classrooms while still often favoring white Americans (Mettler 2005; Herbold 1994). Keri Day’s article for the JRE’s 50th anniversary places central importance on the desegregation of white institutions brought about by the black freedom struggle and other activism against “the white foundations of education.” She describes the importance of these demographic shifts and the spirit of dissent that brought them forth to what religious ethics has become (Day 2023, 50).

The founders translated this experience into the intention to cultivate scholarship on religious ethics that treated a wider range of religious and ethical traditions and that could welcome scholars with commitments across a range of traditions.<sup>15</sup> Students came to class, increasingly, from many backgrounds and traditions, and this pushed the founders to consider what principles and commitments they had been taking for granted. Religious ethics was one way of answering their increasingly diverse pedagogical situation. The cover images of the early journal, with their awesome, pop art feel, reflected the founders' desire to find a nonsectarian way of studying and teaching the things they cared about (Figure 1).

Thus, when Reynolds wrote the "editorial" for the first issue of the JRE that appeared in 1973, he acknowledged that the journal would not overcome its context and history easily. He framed this especially in terms of "Western bias."

Given the present state of our discipline, we have no illusion that essays on Buddhist, African, Hindu, or Islamic ethics will come our way as readily as will essays on Christian or Jewish ethics. We realize we will not easily escape in our initial issues the parochialism and Western bias that tends to characterize the present state of our discipline. (Reynolds 1973)

This statement expressed an acknowledgment of the JRE's parochial position and a fundamental concern with the traditions that were likely to be overrepresented in its pages. It expressed a desire to widen the scope of what was then beginning to be called religious ethics. Reynolds acknowledged that given present realities, the aim would be difficult. Nonetheless, he suggested, the founders hoped to generate a conversation that thus far had not existed, one in which scholars of religious ethics "with different competencies" would gather to

<sup>15</sup> In the 25th anniversary issue of the JRE, Jeffrey Stout was clear about what "religious ethics" meant around the time of its founding.

When the first issue of the JRE appeared in the fall of 1973, a year after I entered graduate school at Princeton University and two years before I joined the faculty there, I had no doubt about the significance of its title within my own academic setting. *Religious ethics* had replaced *Christian ethics* as a field designation in Princeton's graduate program only a few years earlier, when the department was reorganized after four senior faculty members either retired or departed in 1968. (Stout 1997, 26)

This reorganization was, according to Stout, part of a curricular effort to "expunge lingering traces of Christian theological hegemony from the department's basic curricular categories" (26). This expunge-ment was important in a multicultural, multireligious society. "The goal was to accommodate, indeed to promote, the full-fledged participation, within each of the fields, of teachers and students who differed from the Christian majority on the question of what religious commitments, if any, one ought to make" (26). The curricular reforms across the department at Princeton, Stout suggests, were necessary to ensuring that no student or teacher would be unwelcome on the grounds of their own religious commitment.



Figure 1. JRE covers from 1973 to 1979. Glenn Graber explained that the image was designed by a member of the University of Tennessee's theater department who designed sets and "saw it as a religious image, but not sectarian of any sort." [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

“transcend the boundaries now dividing those engaged in the various aspects of this area of study.”<sup>16</sup>

When Reynolds named the various aspects of religious ethics, the list he outlined was “metaethics, normative ethics, decision-making procedures, moral policy thinking and historical ethics.”<sup>17</sup> He went on to suggest that conversations across disciplinary boundaries would be a key feature of the JRE’s mission, encouraging engagement with scholars trained in “the history of religions,” “philosophical ethicists,” “normative political theorists, cultural anthropologists, developmental and humanistic psychologists, sociological theorists, and interpreters of the aesthetic.” The JRE was invested “in each of these conversation as it contributes to sharpening our understanding of the nature and vision of religious ethics.”<sup>18</sup>

Reynolds left the door open for this interdisciplinary conversation to emerge, as he invited “‘state of the discipline’ essays on these and other areas of ethical inquiry that will explore the critical issues of our moment.” In this way, “the critical issues of our moment” were the key focus in the original statement of the purpose of the JRE, and the methods required to pursue this project were left open to development.

<sup>16</sup> One approach to this early aim to overcome an emphasis on Christian and Jewish ethics has been the development of what is known as “comparative religious ethics.” This effort has been so widely adopted that, in some contexts in the history of this journal, “religious ethics” and “comparative religious ethics” seem to function as synonyms. The description of the founders’ contexts offered in this article may help to explain the centrality that comparative ethics has sometimes held in religious ethics—specifically as a way of addressing the “parochialism and Western bias” with which the journal began. John Kelsay traces some of the history of the conversation about comparative religious ethics in this journal in Kelsay 2012. One key historical note from the early period is that “comparative religion” did appear in the 1963 *Schempp* decision: “it might well be said that one’s education is not complete without a study of comparative religion or the history of religion and its relationship to the advancement of civilization,” cited in Hale 1972, 11. This decision may have seemed to offer license to anything “comparative” during the religious studies boom of the 1960s and 70s. Because this article is already too long, I will not say more about comparison, but I tend to share the view Tal Lewis expresses in *Why Philosophy Matters for the Study of Religion—and Vice Versa*, that comparison should be considered a method used by all ethicists rather than a subfield of religious ethics (2015).

<sup>17</sup> As far as I have been able to discover, the three-part description of “comparative, foundational, and historical” in the JRE’s current “Aims and Scope” was set down in writing only in 1991. When I searched for those key terms in foundational documents of the journal, I uncovered the charter and the bylaws, both from 1978, neither of which describes the aims and scope of the journal in any terms more specific than “religious ethics.” I asked Jim Johnson, the second General Editor of the JRE who took over in 1981 when the founding editors stepped back, about documents from the founding that might describe the purposes of the journal. One place he pointed me to was his farewell editorial note in Fall 1991. He pointed out that that note includes a reference to “the foundational, historical, and comparative perspectives that define JRE’s mission.” He wrote, “this three-armed focus was there from the beginning, but this may be the first time it was set down in print.” From everything I have been able to see, Johnson is right on this point: his “Editor’s Note” at the end of his term in 1991 was the first time that “foundational, historical, and comparative” appear together as three main areas of focus in documents related to the JRE (Johnson 1991).

<sup>18</sup> Ron Green pointed out that the structure of the Harvard religion PhD, sponsored by an interdepartmental committee and requiring coursework across departments, had a role in shaping this interdisciplinary description of the project of the JRE. Relatedly, Jim Childress emphasized that “conversation” was key in Reynolds’s description of the project.

## 2. Why Keep Thinking about the Past

I have described three key forces on the founding of the JRE: the context of Christian ethics in which it emerged, the emphasis on engagement with academic philosophy and ethical theory in early editorial practice, and the transformations in pedagogy urged on by demographic changes in university classrooms. I have emphasized these three factors because they were prominent in the self-understanding of the group of editors who established the JRE.

This narrow focus on early editorial practice at the JRE has some major drawbacks, and it is quite limited as an effort to describe religious ethics as a social practice. One of these limitations: the focus I have adopted fails to engage with the development of the JRE since the founding period. In focusing on the founding period, it neglects the vital editorial leadership offered by James Turner Johnson, D. M. Yaeger, John Kelsay, Sumner B. Twiss, Aline Kalbian, Martin Kavka, Diana Fritz Cates, and Irene Oh in the time since. These editors came from different institutional contexts from the founders, and they have transformed the journal in their own ways. They have encouraged work drawing on methods from history, literature, anthropology, sociology, psychology, and others. This interdisciplinarity has meant that the disciplinary emphasis among the JRE's founders on engagement with academic philosophy has been radically widened. Developments within Christian ethics and in the Society of Christian Ethics, the Society of Jewish Ethics, and the Society for the Study of Muslim Ethics have also been ongoing.

In addition, by focusing explicitly on editorial practice, this account has neglected the equally influential practices of authors, reviewers, and readers. In focusing on the JRE itself, and thus elite, scholarly forms of religious ethics, the narrow focus of this article neglects the everyday ethics ongoing in the same period in religious communities. In focusing on the JRE and thus on specifically US American academic institutions and cultures, the narrow focus of this article neglects religious ethical discourses ongoing in the period in other English-speaking countries (not to mention those outside the English-speaking world).<sup>19</sup> I hope that other authors will consider these and other windows onto religious ethics as a much more widely dispersed social practice.

In the redescription of religious ethics as a social practice that I am offering here, the practice is a kind of reckoning with the moral traditions we have received as a way of addressing “the critical issues of our moment.” For so many of the earliest practitioners of the form of religious ethics I have described, their traditional inheritance ran through figures like Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Jonathan Edwards, Soren Kierkegaard, and Karl Barth. Inheritors of those traditions remain well-represented in the JRE. And yet, the journal has also worked to represent other traditions and has met with success, cultivating conversations on ethics across a variety of religious and philosophical traditions.

<sup>19</sup> Indeed, Linda Hogan's article for the JRE's 50th anniversary suggests that efforts to overcome the JRE's parochialism should work against the continuing “dominance of Euro-American conceptual frameworks, disciplinary structures, and theological voices” (Hogan 2023).

In addition, as the world has changed, and religious patterns of affiliation have shifted, many of us are reckoning now with a different kind of religious ethical inheritance, bequeathed to us from a generation who came of age around the time of the JRE's founding, when even many Protestants were trying to undo the hegemony that Protestantism had maintained upon their institutions for so long.

Religious ethics is a social practice, and social practices “belong to groups of people, all of whom have some stake in how they are enacted” (Farneth 2023, 27). For this reason, first-person narration can help to clarify what is at stake in religious ethics as a social practice. So let me describe something about my place in religious ethics.<sup>20</sup> The commitment to the widening of this field, expressed in the first editorial of the JRE and enshrined to greater and lesser degrees in the practice of religious ethics over the years since, has enabled my participation. I am not a white Protestant man myself. I am very white, and that has given me a certain affinity with the history of this particular white-dominated institution, one which has often practiced what Preston N. Williams described in these pages as “‘benign neglect’ of race related historical and normative studies” (Williams 1978).<sup>21</sup> I am

<sup>20</sup> I hope this is to apply a description that John Kelsay has offered of the way “good work” that takes a “perspectival approach” proceeds with “careful attention to context with respect to the interpreter, as well as to the material presented through interpretation” (Kelsay 2012, 595).

<sup>21</sup> Ron Green suggested that the JRE could have done more “to reach out” to authors working on, for example, Indigenous traditions but had nonetheless worked hard, and he pointed out that the profusion of interesting work on certain streams of Christian ethics had always posed a challenge to the aim of diversification.

Well, there was always an effort to reach out. And I faulted the JRE for not reaching out hard enough. But there was a lot of work, a lot of good initiative and effort being made against very significant problems. The editors were receiving many, many [here he laughs with emphasis] Christian contributions: war, economic life, biomedical ethics, Augustine, Kierkegaard, McIntyre. So many interesting people being studied and worked on. That was the bulk of what was being mailed to us. (2022)

I did not have the presence of mind to ask how examples like Roberts 1975 on Black theological ethics made it into the pages of the JRE before the special collection edited by Williams in 1978. Ron Green also suggested that the status of the JRE founders as “onlookers” to the civil rights movement contributed to imbalances in racial representation.

That was a problem that reflected to some extent where we were all coming from, which was not from that struggle. We had very little representation. Only kind of onlooker, or supporter standing but not struggling within that movement. It raises one of the questions of practice *versus* theory, as well. You can have an elegant practitioner. But can they contribute at a theoretical level of scholarship? There were not many younger people being trained in that way. So that was part of the problem. If you were involved in the movement, you were involved in the movement. You were not headed to a PhD in religious ethics. (2022)

When I asked Green how such lack of representation becomes a problem for a field like religious ethics and whether it affects how we develop moral theories, he made an analogy to the feminist movement. “We had this problem with the feminist movement, as well. As you can see, by the names, it's largely male, early on. There was no ideological commitment to its being male. It just was a reflection of the demographics. And it took a while for us to recognize that there were very important theoretical and intellectual issues that required active women's involvement and participation in the scholarly level” (2022). As Fannie Bialek's 50th anniversary article argues, the inclusion of feminist ethics in the pages of the journal has sometimes evaded the reception of feminist claims (2023). Her theoretical point there about inclusion and critique may have broader applicability beyond specifically feminist ethics.

not a man, and the only reason I understood myself to be welcome in this enduringly, mostly-man context was that generous, indefatigable teachers insisted over and over and over again that there could be a place for me.

I am not a Protestant. My own religious and ethical inheritance includes a list of major figures in some contrast to that listed above: Thomas Aquinas we share but then there is Henry David Thoreau, Simone de Beauvoir, Mohandas Gandhi, Myles Horton, Martin Luther King, Jr., Thomas Merton, and Helen Prejean.<sup>22</sup> These were the thinkers I knew were important, by their presence in the life of my family, before I ever read anything about them. I received something like what Brook Wilensky-Lanford has described as a “hodgepodge of progressive values,” except that in my house the aesthetic emphasis was on a quirky, democratic, liberationist white Southern culture, rather than the “New England aesthetics” she describes as the background of her Maine family (Wilensky-Lanford 2015, 241). Scholars of religion often label these currents of religious thought, as many of their practitioners have, “spiritual, but not religious.”

And yet, as my own father aged—my father who had been the president of the Florida Episcopal Youth Council as a teenager in 1960–1961, before traveling around the Mediterranean with L. Ron Hubbard in 1967–1968 and spending much of his adulthood outside the church—he turned back to the Episcopal Church and served communion at the altar rail in Carrabelle, Florida, in the rural Southern county where he lived, wearing Texas under his robe, for the last 10 years of his life. While he was sick, before he died, we planned two funerals: one in the Episcopal church in which he had been baptized and another by the Gulf of Mexico, on the land he loved. He made explicit that the second one was partly motivated by his desire that all his friends could find a way to mourn, including those who would not know what to make of organ music and crucifixes and prayers to a triune God. My father is dead now, but I still hear him when I am back at the altar rail of his church, telling us to “go in peace.” It would not be right to call his life, as he never did, “spiritual, but not religious.”<sup>23</sup>

I was myself baptized at my own initiative as a child, when I was 12 years old, in a Catholic church, and I remain committed to the call of the Christian gospel. I learned what the gospel was, as so many Christians have, through attendance at Mass with my maternal grandparents—and especially, I think, from

<sup>22</sup> I have written a book on Thoreau as a resource for contemporary environmental ethics (Balthrop-Lewis 2021). My current project is about Thomas Merton and his conception of contemplation as it was situated in the politics of the 1960s, including especially the politics of race and ecology.

<sup>23</sup> The description of my father’s kind of life, Christian and questioning as so many are, raises difficulties with the presumed disjunction set up by Stanley Hauerwas when he wrote, about Jeffrey Stout’s *Democracy and Tradition*, “I believe that Stout has written an extremely good and important book that provides for a constructive conversation between those who represent strong religious convictions and those committed to the formation of democratic practices” (Hauerwas 2003, 404). As Stout has often insisted, democratic practices are themselves animated in many important cases by “strong religious convictions.”

the responsibility to read aloud together with my congregation in my own voice “crucify him, crucify him!” in the communal reenactment of Jesús’s Passion on Good Friday. But I did not actually read the Gospels in a Bible until a class about Abraham Joshua Heschel, Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Hebrew Bible prophets, taught in Religious Studies at Stanford University by the sociologist of American Judaism Arnold Eisen. I also became, around that time, a student of Lee Yearly, who had then recently written and taught me that “our abilities, personal peculiarities, inescapable preoccupations, and institutional settings greatly limit both what we can understand and what we feel drawn to understand” (Yearly 1998). That lesson will have shaped the framing of this essay, I realize now.

Thus, my own religion has been shaped—in large part—by religious studies, and my ethical community has been—among other places—in religious ethics.<sup>24</sup> The research for this article has been a kind of reckoning with *this* inheritance, on the understanding that, as James T. Johnson wrote in 1984, “the scribe connects the community to its past” (Johnson 1984). I am convinced that this kind of reckoning requires both stories about the past and stories about the scribe, which may go some way to explaining why I have told you so much about myself.

Jim Johnson, Jean Porter, Jennifer Herdt, and others have continued to argue for the importance of history in religious ethics (Johnson 1979, 1997; Porter 1998; Herdt 2000). And while their interest has often been in figures and events of much greater prominence in the long story of Western philosophical and theological ethics than the founders of the JRE, there is precedent for this kind of self-referential historical account in the pages of the JRE, as when James Gustafson, the Christian ethicist who educated and was educated by many of those involved in the beginning of this journal, offered a 50-year summary of the field of “American Religious Ethics” (Gustafson 1998).<sup>25</sup> (That article was far more ambitious than I have been in scope and for good reason! Gustafson had been there for all of it.)

We learn something about who we are and what we are doing by locating ourselves in this controversial and emerging history. If religious ethics is a tradition worth committing to, it is a tradition worth attending to. As Jeffrey Stout wrote, in

<sup>24</sup> I think this situation demonstrates just how much has changed since James Gustafson wrote that “an ethicist is a former theologian who does not have the professional credentials of a moral philosopher” (1978). Having been a student of religious ethics for my entire academic career, the options that Gustafson saw as obvious have never been available to me.

<sup>25</sup> He listed some of the factors he had in mind that had shaped American religious ethics. In 1965, when Gustafson wrote a chapter on “Christian Ethics” for Paul Ramsey’s edited volume *Religion*, “the events that were to change the context drastically within a decade were only beginning: rapid development of religious studies, changes in theological interests (only some of which sustained themselves—for example, liberation theology, and ethics), the Second Vatican Council, attention to the current British-American moral philosophy, feminism, the civil rights and antiwar movements, holocaust studies, and so forth” (Gustafson 1965, 5).



a summary of Mary Midgley, “to find oneself in a cultural tradition is the beginning, not the end, of critical thought” (Stout 1988, 73). Such work can also help to expose the “hidden curriculum,” making our scholarly community more equitable to those who join it from outside the narrow range of academic institutions from which it grew.

As the instability of democracy, dramatic and often racialized economic inequality, and the unjust distribution of climate change and other environmental harms have become “critical issues of our moment,” time seems both to speed up and to stop under their force. A vision of religious ethics as a social practice supplements apparently timeless methodological or formal descriptions and helps us understand our work in the stream of time, emerging in history and accountable to it.

There is so much more of this work to be done. The hasty sketch I have offered here of how religious ethics emerged as a social practice in the 1960s and 1970s, in the institutional context of the JRE’s founding, has many shortcomings, first among them its focus on a very small number of elite insiders to this quite parochial story. A better history would do more to locate itself in a wider network of contestations about what kind of intellectual traditions sustain moral cultures. For now, this will have to do, but I welcome your additions and corrections—no person can tell a story like this one alone.<sup>26</sup>

### Acknowledgement

Open access publishing facilitated by Australian Catholic University, as part of the Wiley - Australian Catholic University agreement via the Council of Australian University Librarians.

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<sup>26</sup> My efforts to tell the version I have here were greatly aided by readers who commented on drafts in various forms, including Jim Childress, Josh Daniel, Rick Elgendy, Molly Farneth, Clifton Granby, Ron Green, Sarah Imhoff, Jim Johnson, Martin Kavka, Christopher Mayes, Richard Miller, and Jeffrey Stout, as well as colleagues across Australia in the Religion and Politics writing group convened by Rosemary Hancock: Rebecca Banham, Marion Maddox, David Newheiser, Elenie Poulos, Mareike Riedel, and Ryan Williams. I found it impossible to incorporate all of their good ideas, but I thank them for their generous help.

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