

# THE PACIFIC COAST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY: A Fifty-Year Perspective<sup>1</sup>

November 10, 1989

Charles S. McCoy

The subject of the autobiography for this meeting is the Pacific Coast Theological Society itself, not one member of the group. Rather than giving attention, as is the usual practice at each meeting, to the life story of one person, we shall explore at this gathering the story of our life together over fifty years. All of us, therefore, must journey back into our memories of past meetings, sort through the many recollections we have of meetings, discussions, exciting encounters, and friendships formed, and share what symbolizes most vividly for us what we have been and what we are becoming.

## 1. How the Society Began

The energy of John Bennett and the financial backing of the Hazen Foundation brought the Pacific Coast Theological Society into being fifty years ago. The interest of successive generations of scholars in theological and religious studies in the western states has kept it growing and thriving over five decades. When John Bennett invited people to the first meeting, it was not known by the sonorous name that we now have. John's announcement went "To members of the Pacific Coast group of 'younger Christian thinkers.'"<sup>2</sup> In John's mind, the west coast gathering was parallel to "the younger theologians" discussion group that had been meeting on the east coast beginning in 1935, at first alternating between New Haven and Washington and later holding all its meetings at the College of Preachers, National Cathedral, Washington.

After appropriate advance contact and preparation, the first meeting of the Pacific Coast Group convened at the Saratoga Inn, in Saratoga, near San Jose, for the weekend of October 20-22, 1939. John Bennett chaired the gathering, served as secretary, and handled the money, a pattern for the duties of the secretary that continued until quite recently.

The subject for that first meeting was "What Is Essential In the Christian Religion?" Papers were presented by a cast of characters with names familiar to most of us:

James Muilenburg, "Christianity and Judaism"

Galen Fisher, "Christianity and Oriental Religions"

Elton Trueblood, "Christianity as History and as Idea"

Randolph Crump Miller, "The Historical Jesus and Christianity"

---

<sup>1</sup>For information contained in this paper, I am indebted to John Bennett, Randolph Crump Miller, and Aaron Ungersma for recollections they shared. Clare Fischer provided a copy of the announcement of the first meeting, which John Bennett had sent to her. Further data were in my own files, in records assembled when I was Secretary, and in the card catalogue at the Graduate Theological Union Library.

<sup>2</sup>See the attached copy of John's letter calling the first meeting in 1939. From Paul Braisted of the Hazen Foundation, John had secured the promise that the munificent sum of \$500 would be available annually to enable members from southern California, Oregon, and even Washington to converge on the Bay Area for meetings in the fall and in the spring. This important subsidy by the Hazen Foundation continued until 1967.

Aaron Ungersma, "Does the Reformation Represent a Permanent  
Positive Principle in the Understanding of Christianity?"

Aaron Ungersma still remembers vividly the topic of his paper, which he says was assigned to him by John Bennett. Randolph Crump Miller thinks that a presentation of some kind was made by Bernard Meland. As Meland apparently did not give a paper, he may have provided the first summation at the close. Plans were also made for future meetings. Aaron also remembers that there was an Englishman in attendance, probably Arnold Nash, then rector of an Episcopal church in Oakland, who spent as much time listening to the radio to see how the recently declared war in Europe was going as participating in the theological discussions at the meeting.

Though I have not located the list of those to whom the announcement of the first meeting went out or of those who actually attended, the recollections of people there suggest that, besides those giving papers, members of the original group included Cyril Gloyn, Bishop James C. Baker (Methodist), Bishop Karl M. Block (Episcopal), A. C. McGiffert, Jr., John Krumm, George Hedley, Arnold Nash, and Morgan O'Dell. Robert Fitch, Elliott Diller, Albert Edward Day, Clarence Reidenbach, Dwight Smith, Rev. Everett Thomson of Pasadena, Professor Lanz of Stanford, John Skoglund, Ted Hume, Walter Muelder, Frederick Spiegelberg, Howard Thurman, Everett Basshart, George Hunston Williams, and Eugene Carson Blake joined the group over the next few years. The decision was made at the first meeting to have sessions in the future on Friday afternoon and Saturday morning, rather than over the entire weekend. With minor changes and occasional alterations for special events, this pattern has continued over the decades.

The second meeting of the new group took place on April 12-13, 1940, at St. Dorothy's Rest in Saratoga. Papers were given by John Krumm, Bernard Meland, Bishop Block, Arnold Nash, and John Bennett. For the third meeting, on November 8-9, 1940, papers were given by Cyril Gloyn, Cush McGiffert, Bishop Block, Bishop Baker, and Elliott Diller. The site for this gathering was the School of the Prophets at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco. With a few exceptions, the Episcopal chapter house at the Cathedral became the place where the society met regularly until the late 1970s, when parking problems in San Francisco and space in the meeting room for the increasing number of participants led to the decision to try meeting in Berkeley at St. John's Presbyterian Church on College Avenue. That place worked out well and became the regular meeting place until the move to the GTU. One member resigned because of the change of location from San Francisco to Berkeley.

At the meeting on May 2-3, 1941, presentations were given by Albert Edward Day, Clarence Reidenbach, George Hedley, Rev. Thomson, and Morgan O'Dell. On November 7-8, 1941, Dwight Smith, James Muilenburg, Elton Trueblood, Aaron Ungersma, and Professor Lanz, led off in the discussions. On April 17-18, 1942, it was John Skoglund, Ted Hume, Walter Muelder, and Frederick Spiegelberg. On October 30-31, 1942, George Hedley, John Bennett, Robert Fitch, Elliott Diller, and Galen Fisher were up. On April 30-May 1, 1943, Everett Basshart, Professor Lanz, Walter Muelder, George Williams, and John Bennett led, with Bennett apparently giving his autobiography prior to leaving Pacific School of Religion for Union Theological Seminary in New York. On November 5-6, 1943, Cyril Gloyn, Aaron Ungersma, John Skoglund, and Bernard Meland gave presentations. At this meeting, on the evening of November 5, a memorial service was held for Ted Hume, who had died since the previous meeting of the group.

Since John had departed for the east coast, the meeting of April 28-29, 1944, was chaired by Randolph Crump Miller. He was not elected as secretary and chair, however, until the meeting in April, 1945. He served until he left for Yale in 1952. At the meeting of November 10-11, 1944, presentations were given by Frederick Spiegelberg, Randolph Miller, Bernard Meland, and Eugene Carson Blake. New members admitted at that time were John Wick Bowman, Hugh Vernon White, and Pierson Parker. At the meeting held April 20-21, 1945, discussions were led by John Krumm, Everett Thomson, Cush McGiffert, and Clarence Reidenbach.

At about this time, the most significant joint project of the group during this early period began. It involved the preparation of one of the four volumes of the Interseminary Series being planned by Robert Bilheimer, Executive Secretary of the National Interseminary Committee. Volume II, "The Church and Organized Movements" was edited by Randolph Crump Miller as chair of the Pacific Coast Theological Group. The meetings for 1945-46 were taken up with planning the volume, having the chapters presented for discussion and criticism at a special gathering, and revising them for publication.

Members of the Group at that time, in addition to Miller, were James C. Baker, Eugene Carson Blake, Karl Morgan Block, John Wick Bowman, Elliott Van N. Diller, Galen Fisher, Robert E. Fitch, Buell G. Gallagher, Cyril Gloyn, George Hedley, John Krumm, Pierson Parker, Morgan Odell, Clarence Reidenbach, John Skoglund, Dwight Smith, Frederic Spiegelberg, Everett Thomson, Elton Trueblood, Aaron Ungersma, Hugh Vernon White, Lynn T. White, and George Williams. Included for discussions of the volume were John H. Ballard, Theodore H. Greene, Edward Ohrenstein, Edward Lambe Parsons, Howard Thurman, Stacy Warburton, and Frederick West, some of whom became members of the Group.

It is surprising that more projects of that kind have not been undertaken by the Society over the years. Perhaps recovering the memory of that achievement now will stimulate similar cooperative ventures.

## 2. Changes in the Society

When the group began, it was white, male, and Protestant Christian. The first non-white member was Howard Thurman in the 1940s. He was an active member for several years, when he was in San Francisco founding the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples. After he left for Boston University, there was no non-white member until Cornelius Berry was admitted during the year 1969-70. The first woman to become a member was Georgia Harkness in 1950. After she retired from Pacific School of Religion in 1962 and soon thereafter became an honorary member of the Pacific Coast Theological Group, her place as the lone woman in this men's room of west coast theology was soon taken by Jane Dempsey Douglass. Not until the 1970s did women enter the society in greater numbers.

The all-Protestant character of the group was not breached until the early 1960s. Thus, the first twenty five years witnessed no further venturing beyond the bounds of Protestant inclusiveness than the presence of a few Anglo-Catholics from the Episcopal Church. In the second twenty five years, the group has become increasingly broad in membership. Ecumenical contacts had already been taking place and could become more public in nature as the influence of the Second Vatican Council began to be felt. Daniel O'Hanlon, a Jesuit, with whom some members of the Pacific Coast Theological Group had become acquainted through a Stanford-Santa Clara-Berkeley ecumenical colloquium, was

invited to participate in the meeting of November 3-4, 1961. He was subsequently voted into membership and joined in 1963. At that first meeting Dan attended, he was assigned a topic that assumed him to be an expert on medieval theology. With good humor, he helped break one stereotype by confessing that he was not a specialist on the Middle Ages, but if they wanted a discussion on Paul Tillich, call him in, as Tillich had been the subject of his dissertation. As the Graduate Theological Union developed, other Roman Catholic members joined and have been active since. The first Roman Catholic secretary appears to have been John Wright, from the Jesuit School of Theology, Berkeley, from 1973-75.

On December 1, 1966, Paul Braisted wrote John von Rohr, at that time secretary of the Pacific Coast Theological Group. Braisted wanted a general report on the activities of the organization but also warned that the modest grant, then up to \$600 annually, would probably be terminated along with contributions to similar groups. He assured John von Rohr that there would be a 1967 budget provision for at least one meeting of the west coast theologians.

John replied with a letter dated December 13, 1966, giving Braisted information about the group. "We now have 55 members," he wrote, "40 of whom are in the Bay Area. Of the remaining 15, there are 12 in central or southern California and 2 in Oregon. You will be interested to know that 4 of our members are Roman Catholics, the result of a recent broadening of the ecumenical character of our makeup to our great profit." A report was also included on the annual assessment of \$8.00 per person, changed in November, 1966, from a "travel pool" to "membership dues." The Hazen Foundation decided not to continue funding the theological groups beyond 1967, as Braisted informed von Rohr in a letter of February 28, 1967, and John informed the membership in a memorandum dated March 6, 1967.

The name Pacific Coast Theological Group seems to have been adopted quite early in the existence of the organization. This name remained until 1970, when the name was changed to Pacific Coast Theological Society. Contacts were made in the late 1970s and early 1980s to form organizational links with the counterpart groups on the east coast and middle west. Exchanges of information about meetings took place for several years. Differences over the kind of national organization that would be appropriate prevented any substantial moves toward integration of the groups at that time. The Middle West and Pacific Coast groups wanted a loose confederation, at least at the beginning, but the East Coast group wanted a strong central form of governance, apparently to be controlled from the northeast. Perhaps further conversations can take place in the future.

### 3. Some Personal Impressions and Recollections

My relation with the Pacific Coast Theological Group began in 1960, shortly after my arrival in Berkeley. I was invited to attend as a guest and was then elected to membership. Not only did I find the discussions stimulating, but the contacts fitted in well with another project in which I was engaged. When I arrived at Pacific School of Religion in August, 1959, I secured a grant from the Danforth Foundation to support conversations for cooperative doctoral work among the seminaries and with either the University of California, Berkeley, or Stanford. The first meeting to begin this project was held in October, 1959. At that time, representatives of several seminaries initiated relationships, contacts, and plans, and continued, in spite of various conflicts and difficulties, until the Graduate Theological Union at last came into being in 1962. The friendships and professional interchange that took place in the theological group, as well as

the ecumenical contacts made at St. Patrick's Seminary, Alma College, and the University of Santa Clara, were essential for overcoming many obstacles and bringing together the first ecumenical and interreligious theological faculty in the world.

My most vivid recollections of the Society over the years are focused on the fascinating people who belong. Some have become good friends and others interesting acquaintances. Above all, they have led me into new areas of thought with their scholarly papers and the provocative discussions, some that took place in the plenary sessions and probably more that occurred in the breaks between presentations or over the meals together. Quite a few discussions that began at the meetings have continued in classrooms, homes, seminars, and wherever members might gather. Many ideas that arose or were encouraged in these discussions have appeared in articles and books, no doubt improved by the tempering processes of the group.

Through the years there have also been times of frustration. One such time was during an era when subjects assigned to people for papers were deliberately chosen so as to be outside their areas of specialized knowledge. Needless to say, the discussions were often more illuminating than the papers, though I can remember a few exceptions when a nonspecialist's perspective produced surprisingly interesting and helpful results.

The sessions could be equally frustrating when narrowly specialized views dominated. In what may have been my first presentation to the group, I was assigned the task of commenting on one paper at a meeting when the subject was "The New Quest for the Historical Jesus." I found the papers interesting, but they appeared to emerge from a narrow perspective that ignored the wider world to which some of the rest of us belonged. My comments on the paper began as follows:

As I do not belong to the Society for Bultmannian Literature and Exegesis, and in fact from what I know of the corpus of that group have come to entertain doubts about the Bultmann of history, I feel a certain distance from a discussion that seems at times concerned with its own inner processes of clarification rather than grappling either with the Lord of Christian faith or with the questions posed by the world around. As I listen to the discussion, I wonder whether there can be any engagement on issues not raised within the assumptions of Bultmann's existentialist metaphysics. Yet it is not only the inner workings of the system but also the presuppositions that need to be brought under critical scrutiny.

It is a measure of the great tolerance of the group that I was not ejected immediately. I then proceeded to suggest that the separation of "the historical Jesus" from "the Christ of faith" was the product of an inadequately critical understanding of history. Further, to "speak of *bruta facta* as the *ens realissimum* of historical science, or for that matter of physical science, seems to presuppose a metaphysic which can no longer be supported." My remarks were as welcome to the Bultmanniacs, needless to say, as is the proverbial illegitimate offspring at a family gathering. But across the verbal battlefield my glance met the amused and understanding eyes of Ben Reist, and some of the most exciting conversations of my years in California followed.

Another frustration for me emerged from the way discussions were chaired, or, in too many instances, not chaired. In the absence of firm leadership from the chair, the floor went to the loudest and most aggressive participants. (Yes, we have had a few). It took some complaining, some building of a coalition of concern, and the passage of a few years, but the practice gradually developed in which the chair kept a list of persons wishing to speak and protected the order by calling on them -- with, of course, some flexibility when needed. Jim McClendon, when secretary of the Society, proclaimed that he enjoyed presiding because it was the only occasion in his life when he exercised absolute power!

One of the great joys of many of my years in the Society was participating with Margie. At home, we talked together about the papers and presentations. At the meetings, we always sat apart because we were each professionals with distinct points of view. The result of that enjoyment together meant that, with her illness and death, meetings of the Society became for a time unbearable. My return has of necessity been in stages as I found it possible to overcome the pain and again be with you.

From 1980 to 1983, I was honored to be Secretary of the Society. One of my accomplishments during this time, as I recall, was to lower the annual membership dues from \$30 to \$25 by the simple expedient of shifting the Society's funds into an interest-bearing checking account. The participation of members rose sufficiently so that even the room at St. John's Presbyterian Church, larger than the one of the Cathedral Chapter House, was too small, and we found it necessary to have some of the sessions in a very big room at St. John's. The additional size and distance, however, diminished the sense of conversation, and we returned to the overstuffed intimacy of the smaller room.

While serving as secretary, discussions with the east coast and middle western groups took place. In the process, I happened to see their membership lists. As I compared them with our list, I realized that we had, in the Pacific Coast Theological Society, probably the most distinguished membership of any comparable group of persons in theological and religious studies in this country and possibly around the globe. I presented my finding about the quality of the Society to the group at a Friday evening gathering. Though you may find it difficult to believe, I report in all truth that no one in the Society took issue with me. And so I anticipate our continued growth in learning, in vitality, and in humility.

To the members of the Pacific Coast group of "younger Christian thinkers":

At last it is possible to give most of the details concerning our first meeting.

You will remember that the time that has been set is October 20th - 22nd. 1939

The place will be the Saratoga Inn. This is a few miles from San Jose. Those who do not drive from this area will be met at the station in San Jose if they let us know when they plan to arrive. There should be a minimum of time lost in making connections by train from north or south and those coming from the south will not have to come quite as far. That is one reason for the choice of Saratoga.

The subject will be: WHAT IS ESSENTIAL IN THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION?

It was thought that such a subject would be good in enabling us to come to know one another's minds at the outset.

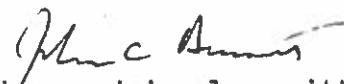
The following papers will be read:

Christianity and Judaism - (Mullenburg)  
Christianity and Oriental Religions - (Fisher)  
Christianity as History and as Idea - (Trueblood)  
The Historical Jesus and Christianity - (Miller)  
Does the Reformation Represent a Permanent Positive  
Principle in the Understanding of Christianity?  
(Ungersma)

We shall have to plan the exact program in terms of hours after I get necessary information from you.

Will you please indicate on the enclosed post card whether or not you can arrive for the session of Friday evening and whether or not you can remain for a session on Sunday morning. If you cannot remain for Sunday, does that mean in the case of any of you that you must take a night train Saturday night? Since the night trains for the south leave at a shockingly early hour on this coast, it is to be hoped that you don't have to take one.

The cost at the Inn will be at the rate of \$4.00 per day for room and meals. If there is anyone who will be kept away from the meeting by that expense in addition to the contribution of \$4.00 to the transportation of \$4.00 to the transportation pool, I wish that he would let me know confidentially. You will remember that the stipulation made by the Hazen Foundation is that we pay part of the transportation expense ourselves. In accordance with that stipulation, the figure for each one was put at \$4.00. It will not be greater than that in any case and there is a chance that it can be reduced slightly.

  
For the provisional committee