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Walter Harrelson

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PROPOSED NEW DIRECTIONS FOR THE SOCIETY

Walter Harrelson
Chairman, Central Committee

At its fall 1968 meeting in New Haven the Central Committee of the Society proposed certain changes in the Society's annual meeting for 1969. By implication, we were thereby suggesting that these changes continue and that they affect all aspects of the Society's life and work.

We spoke in New Haven about recent annual meetings. All of us indicating that these had been enjoyable and productive, we thought, for most members. We acknowledged that our membership has grown large and that the talents and interests of members are very diverse today. It seemed evident to us that no program at an annual meeting could easily offer interesting or exciting fare for all members. We believed that a good number of the Fellows greatly appreciated the morning disciplinary and interdisciplinary groups, that the variety was considerable in morning, evening and special afternoon sessions. We also had the view that many Fellows and their families like the existing general format of the annual meeting, with its time for play, for the renewal or deepening of friendships, and for serious scholarly interchange.

Even so, as we spoke, we came to believe that the annual meeting of Fellows, most of whom obviously were involved in various aspects of the contemporary revolution in university life, ought more directly to address this revolution. How could we spend a week of our lives in company with highly gifted scholars, teachers, administrators, and educational planners and not take account of the twofold revolution in contemporary life so ably sketched by Kenneth Kenniston and others?1

Recently, a number of academic/professional societies have begun to organize effectively for the renovation of their disciplines or professions. The process was sketched briefly by James N. Settle of the American Council of Learned Societies in an address to the 1968 annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, meeting in Berkeley, California.2 The ACLS, with the support of the Danforth Foundation, has sponsored the creation of a Council on the Study of Religion, designed to co-ordinate and further the development of religious studies in North America. This Council, now coming into being under the chairmanship of Claude Welch, will attempt to see that the powers of various societies in the field of religion are focused to ac-

1. I have in mind especially the essay by Kenniston in the May 4, 1969 issue of the New York Times Magazine.
2. Published in the Bulletin of the American Academy of Religion (Summer 1969), 3 - 8.

comply worthwhile purposes in the field and also to see that these powers are wielded responsibly and tellingly as a part of the revolution in education and in society now unfolding.

An association of parish clergy is coming into being, one aim of which is to see that church renewal proceeds at an accelerated pace. The American Association of Theological Schools, the American Association of University Professors, The American Medical Association (!) and a host of similar bodies all are oriented today toward furthering social change that offers prospect of shaping the revolution in ways considered appropriate and urgent.

Our Society has certain advantages over these disciplinary/professional ones. Its attempts to understand and to influence the revolution should not too easily degenerate into self-serving endeavors. Our commitments are not, as Fellows, to particular disciplines, institutions, professions, or ideologies. Rather, we are committed to undertake and to commend purposeful interdisciplinary explorations that promise to enrich the quality and moral purposes of our common life, to deepen our understanding of man's personal and social existence, to enlarge our sensibilities in face of the "grandeur and misery of man."³

Such a commitment entails, I believe, the use of our annual meeting in ways that directly confront the strains and the new openings for change in political and social life. Such confrontation has not been absent in previous annual meetings. But it is more central, we think, in the program of the 1969 annual meeting than it has been before.

We do not propose that the Society become exclusively a society for political and social action. We foresee the continuation of serious disciplinary and interdisciplinary work, as in the program for this summer. We commend to Fellows, however, the proposition that a society of Fellows with our set of purposes and commitments must use its annual meeting and its overall talents and resources to share in man's struggle for a richer personal and social life.

Some of us have come to believe that we can not afford the luxury of a week with gifted colleagues each year that does not directly address the question of the future of higher education, the moral commitments of educators that go beyond scholarly integrity and excellence, the reform of the university, the easing of the hurts and the facing of the anger and bitterness of fellow citizens, and related issues.

We know that displays of passion on social and moral questions are no substitutes for careful thinking and planning. We know that scholarship requires dispassionate exchange, reflection that is more contemplative than active, and often a withholding of judgment and a refusal to act or to decide. These virtues and requirements must

3. A phrase of the late David E. Roberts.

stand alongside of, and be entwined with, the commitment to act before all is clear, to choose among alternatives when we would prefer to wait.

Our program for this annual meeting offers opportunity for us to gauge the extent to which the Central Committee has rightly discerned what Fellows want the Society to be and to become in these regards. If our assessment proves to have been off the mark, Fellows will not hesitate to inform us!

But for this week, let's see what we can do to clarify the shape and scope of the revolution in university and professional/academic life and to find the ways in which we, individually and as a society of Fellows, can help the New University to come to birth in North America.