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William P. Alston

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## SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE EARLY DAYS OF THE SOCIETY OF CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHERS

William P. Alston

So far as I am aware, the first move toward the founding of the Society was a letter I wrote to Al Plantinga early in 1977, suggesting the desirability of such an organization. He responded with enthusiasm, and a few people were contacted to set up a meeting at the 1977 Central Division meetings of the American Philosophical Association (APA). A small group of us met for a hurried lunch and some preliminary planning. I don't remember exactly who was present, but the group included, besides Al and myself, George Mavrodes and Ken Konyndyk. We decided to deputize Ken to send out an announcement of an organizational meeting at the 1978 Central Division meetings (thus inaugurating Ken's many years of devoted labor in the service of the Society). For this purpose mailing lists were drawn from the Wheaton College conference, the American Catholic Philosophical Association and other sources. In addition we decided to combine the organizational meeting with a number of paper presentations. The notice also included a call for papers.

We had absolutely no idea what kind of response we would receive. To our amazement close to a hundred people showed up for the organizational meeting. An executive committee was approved, I was elected president and Ken Konyndyk secretary-treasurer. Dues were set at \$5.00. Notices of the formation of the Society were sent to all the likely candidates we could think of. And the rest, as they say, is history.

For the first year public activities were restricted to fringe group meetings at the various divisions of the APA, the American Catholic Philosophical Association and the Canadian Philosophical Association. By the spring of 1979 we had a constitution and other appurtenances of corporate life. The membership grew by leaps and bounds. By the end of 1981 it had reached almost 400.

As could be expected, there were various issues to be resolved. Some people were in favor of opening the membership to anyone interested in the philosophical issues raised by Christianity, whether they were Christians or not. But the consensus was to make it a society of Christian philosophers. But how were 'Christian' and 'philosopher' to be construed? In the attempt to define what it is to be a Christian we immediately ran into denominational differences - criteria ranging from baptism to making a conscious adult decision to accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. We toyed with the idea of the classic Christian creeds



as a test, but we ran into opposition there. Finally, realizing that the imposition of any test would result in a narrower fellowship than we had envisaged, we decided to let prospective members self-classify themselves. A parallel decision with respect to being a philosopher was reached more quickly, since we had no desire to restrict membership to "professional" philosophers. Hence from early on the Society was open to anyone who considered him/herself both a Christian and a philosopher (no questions asked on either score!).

There were two early developments that really got the Society moving. The first was the regional meetings. They began when Mike Peterson organized a mini-conference at Asbury College in May, 1979, barely a year after the organization of the Society! That was followed in August, 1979 by a Midwestern meeting at Wheaton College, organized by Art Holmes, who had the benefit of many years experience organizing the annual Wheaton College Philosophy Conference. The following year the torch was taken up in the southeast by Janine Marie Idziak, who arranged meetings several years in a row at Eastern Kentucky University. By 1982 the attendance at these meetings was in the hundreds. The first Pacific Regional meeting was held at Westmont College in Santa Barbara in March 1981. Meanwhile Janine had moved from Eastern Kentucky U. to Loras College in Iowa, with the predictable result that the Midwestern Regional Meetings, which had not continued after the 1979 start at Wheaton College, were revived. More recently an annual Mountains-Plains Regional meeting has sprung up. All four regions have continued to hold annual meetings. What is especially heartening about all this is that the meetings are not solely dependent on their original founders. The nitty gritty work has been shared over the years by many, many different folk.

So as the Society headed into the 80's, membership was increasing, and annual regional meetings were springing up all over the country. The only thing we lacked was money. And this problem was solved, paradoxically enough, by taking on additional financial obligations. After Mike Peterson had started the ball rolling on regional meetings, he turned his attention to publications. He began developing ideas along this line in 1980. He suggested that we consider three possibilities: (1) a center for reproducing and supplying on demand papers presented at meetings of the society, (2) annual publication of proceedings, and (3) publication of a scholarly journal. These possibilities were discussed at three successive executive committee meetings in 1980 and 1981. At the December, 1981, meeting, with Bob Adams now in the presidency, and heartened by the news that Asbury College had offered a subsidy of \$5,000 a year, the committee unanimously approved the creation of a journal of the Society. I was dragooned into becoming editor, with Mike Peterson as managing editor. Again there were numerous decisions to be made. Our first two ideas for a title had to be dropped because of prior ownership, and we finally settled on *Faith and Philosophy*, which has served us well. Then there was the question of financial support. Syracuse University chipped in with secretarial support, but there was the cost of production. Various foundations were approached, but to no

avail. Then someone had the bright idea of raising dues with a subscription to *Faith and Philosophy* included. We didn't know whether this would result in a catastrophic drop in membership, but in fact it worked out beautifully. The dues were raised from \$5.00 to \$16.00, and the membership continued to increase. The journal quickly became established as one of the premier periodicals in philosophy of religion (the original idea was not to make it a philosophy of religion journal, but never mind). And thus by taking on additional financial obligations, our financial resources dramatically increased. Talk about loaves and fishes!!

*Syracuse University*