

# News & Views

## Should ASA Defend and Advance Professional Ethics in Science and Technology Professions?

### Should ASA Defend and Advance Professional Ethics in Science and Technology Professions?

by Joseph P. Carson, ASA Member, President of the Affiliation of Christian Engineers (ACE) <[www.christianengineer.org](http://www.christianengineer.org)>, 10953 Twin Harbour Drive, Knoxville, TN 37922  
[jpcarson@mindspring.com](mailto:jpcarson@mindspring.com)

I am a licensed professional engineer (P.E.), nuclear safety engineer, and “eight-time prevailing and still aggrieved” whistleblower in the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE).<sup>1</sup> I am also a member of ASA. Is there a clear nexus between being a member of ASA and being willing to risk and suffer to uphold and defend a profession’s code of ethics in one’s employment? If so, does ASA have a collective responsibility in such a situation and how can it be discharged?

ASA defines itself as “a fellowship of men and women of science and disciplines that can relate to science who share a common fidelity to the Word of God and a *commitment to integrity in the practice of science* (emphasis added).”<sup>2</sup> ASA’s Statement of Faith captures this, to some extent, in its fourth statement:

4. We recognize our responsibility, as stewards of God’s creation, to use science and technology for the good of humanity and the whole world.<sup>3</sup>

I contend this statement does not adequately capture ASA’s identity and mission. I suggest that ASA’s Statement of Faith should be amended by adding a fifth statement to include:

5. “We will model and advocate, individually and collectively, the trustworthy—ethical, competent, and accountable—practice of our chosen professions.”

ASA is a hybrid organization containing elements of a both a professional society and a learned society. Professional societies exist for two basic reasons: (1) advance the interests of its members and (2) advance greater societal interests by advancing the ethical, competent, and accountable practice of that profession. Professional societies generally advocate a variety of positions in a variety of ways. Learned Societies exist to further the increase and dissemination of knowledge in a given area.

ASA’s policy that, “as an organization, the ASA does not take a position when there is honest disagreement between Christians on an issue,” reflects the learned society part of its nature. Obviously, there can be (and is) a tension between ASA’s policy of neutrality and its recognized collective responsibility to use science and technology for humanity’s good.

In my opinion, ASA’s policy of neutrality has been misapplied in the area of professional ethics. I do not think there can be an honest disagreement between ASAers about the proposition that, “We (ASA and its members)

will, model and advocate, individually and collectively, the trustworthy—ethical, competent and accountable—practice of our chosen professions.”

I do not fit the standard ASA demographic. I have neither a Ph.D. nor a career in academe or research. I am a licensed professional engineer. Engineering is complimentary to science, but quite distinct. Science exists to determine objective truth about the physical world. Engineering exists to apply science to the world’s resources for the practical betterment of humankind. Science ethics focuses on truth. Engineering ethics focuses on public health, safety, and welfare. That is why many engineers, but few, if any, scientists, are licensed by the State. The code of ethics for engineers, implemented on a “strict honor code” basis, explicitly requires whistleblowing in situations involving public/workplace health and safety.

Consider the following relevant observations:

Christians, who are members of a recognized profession, will spend the greatest portion of conscious hours in life preparing for or pursuing their career in their chosen profession.

Becoming a member of a profession is one of the least fungible aspects of such a person’s life—it takes too many years of academic training and experience to join a profession and too much money is usually involved to leave one’s profession to join another. In today’s society, it is probably easier to change jobs, homes, churches, and marriages than to change one’s standing as a professional.

A member of a profession probably has the greatest influence in life in his or her family and career or profession.

Professions exist for the well being of their members and to advance the well being of society at large by advocating advances in the ethical and competent practice of that profession. In that way, they differ from trade unions that exist for solely for the benefit of their members. In America, professions have a great deal of autonomy and are, largely, self-regulating.

Professions have codes of ethics. An explicit condition on membership in a profession is adherence to that code of ethics. In a sense, professions exist to advance and defend their codes of ethics. Without a viable code of ethics, a profession becomes a trade.

While professions are secular, as are their codes of ethics, a Christian in a profession has a compelling spiritual reason to uphold and defend them that is not present for a non-Christian.

An employed Christian in a profession has five distinct loyalties: (1) country, (2) employer, (3) profession, (4) self and family and (5) church and faith community. The church, including organs like ASA, is near silent about how Christians in a profession should be salt, light, and leaven in that profession and about how they should resolve tensions that can arise among the differ-

ent loyalties. Consequently, much of the institutional evil that exists in today's world is enabled by Christian (and other) members of professions who frequently shirk their professional obligations to "go in harm's way," out of economic fear or greed. The stakes are frequently quite high when one places oneself "in harm's way" out of professional obligation—loss of career opportunities, if not loss of job, and blacklisting are all too frequent occurrences.

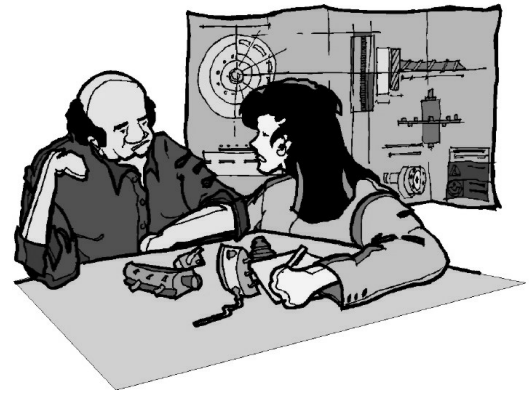
In Luke 3:10–15, John the Baptist gives some guidance on professional ethics, which reduces to "do the right thing by your professional obligations." As the protagonist in *Carson v. DOE*, I argue that my "offense" has been placing my professional obligations for public/workplace health and safety, as described in the code of ethics for engineers and the "rules of professional conduct" for P.E.'s, before my self-interest, something for which DOE apparently will neither forgive nor forget.

ASA has been generous in reporting my case in its newsletter, *Newsletter of the American Scientific Affiliation & Canadian Scientific and Christian Affiliation*. However, because its policy of neutrality trumps its stewardship mandate in matters of professional ethics, ASA perceives no collective responsibility to use *Carson v. DOE* (or similar situations) as an opportunity to collectively defend or advance the code of ethics for engineers.

Despite ASA's general policy of neutrality, limited resources, and legal realities, it can advance the professional code of ethics of its members in the workplace in three ways if ASA revises its Statement of Faith:

1. File (or join) explicitly neutral *amicus curiae* briefs (i.e. friend of the court briefs) that clearly disavow any knowledge on any contested particular in nonfrivolous workplace discrimination cases involving professional ethics but that uphold and defend the importance of professional codes of ethics and a professional's adherence to them in his or her employment.<sup>4</sup>
2. Contact the employer in instances when the professional is legally vindicated, and formally express concern that the employer not only offended the particular employee, but also the entire profession's code of ethics. Furthermore, urge the employer to restore the offended employee and address its workplace culture that contributed to the unlawful discrimination.
3. Call for the most severe professional sanctions (up to permanent expulsion) in cases where one member of a profession engages in workplace reprisal against another who has adhered to professional obligation.

In my opinion, ASA should clarify its neutrality policy with its stewardship and integrity mandates in matters involving professional ethics. Adherence to professional ethics, even in obedience to Jesus' calling to be "salt, light



and leaven," can cost a professional quite dearly. While one's life and liberty are not called into play, in America at least, just about everything of value—one's job, career, personal reputation, professional reputation, savings, and family—are "in-play" all too often in these cruel situations.

After sixty years of existence, ASA does not see itself as having a "salt, light, and leaven" role that includes actively upholding/defending/advancing the codes of ethics of the science and technology professions. Obviously, I think ASA should be more active and thereby consistent with its "commitment to integrity in the practice of science," and its responsibility to "use science and technology for the good of humanity and the whole world."

I fault the broader "religion-science" dialogue for its lack of focus on professional ethics. "Physician heal thyself" seems to apply, particularly as broader ethical statements seem to regularly emanate from the dialogue. I also fault ASA and the broader "religion-science" dialogue for its general silence to the reality of religious persecution in the world. It is self-evident that religious freedom is fundamental to ASA's existence and the religion-science dialogue in general. Thus, ASA should actively work to advance, defend, and uphold religious freedom in the sciences and engineering professions. I contend that ASA needs to become an agent of change.

ASA can become an effective agent of change in the following three ways:

1. Corporately call upon America's major scientific and engineering professional societies to amend their constitutions, by-laws, and policies as necessary to incorporate the standard "anti-discrimination" language (i.e. the societies will not discriminate in membership on basis of sex, age, nationality, color, race, religion, etc).
2. Corporately call upon these major professional societies to establish policies requiring similar "anti-discrimination" language in the constitutions, by-laws, and/or policies of major professional societies in other countries with which they establish formal ties.
3. As individual members, advocate the same proposal within the major professional societies to which they hold membership. If my experience is illustrative, positions of leadership and influence in these professional societies go begging, and these organizations are quite responsive to the expressed interests of their membership.

## News & Views

### *Should ASA Defend and Advance Professional Ethics in Science and Technology Professions?*

My proposal may not seem like much in light of the religious persecution and other human rights issues in the world, but it is something worthwhile and feasible that might help persuade more people to join ASA and/or retain their membership. More importantly, it would be a sign of solidarity/brotherhood to Christians and others in the sciences and engineering professions who face persecution for their religious faith. ASA is a membership organization, everyone's voice counts, so please give the ASA Council (and others ASAers) the benefit of your thoughts by email, telephone call, and/or letter.      ❖

#### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup>[www.carsonversusdoe.com](http://www.carsonversusdoe.com)

<sup>2</sup>[www.asa3.org/ASA/aboutASA.html](http://www.asa3.org/ASA/aboutASA.html)

<sup>3</sup>[www.asa3.org/ASA/faithASA.html](http://www.asa3.org/ASA/faithASA.html)

<sup>4</sup>[www.carsonversusdoe.com/amicus.htm](http://www.carsonversusdoe.com/amicus.htm) is an example derived from the 1977 BART brief of the IEEE