CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE WORK OF GEORGE FOOT MOORE

[169] I am sensible not only of the honor of being asked to speak on the work of George Foot Moore, but also of the danger of accepting the invitation. To discuss the achievements of an enormously learned man, a man of untiring industry and, by all accounts, of prodigious memory, who devoted a long lifetime to learning, is a first-rate opportunity of displaying one's own ignorance. Even Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai lamented that from the vastness of his teachers' wisdom he had taken away no more than a fly does when it dips in the sea. And since the extent of human knowledge so far exceeds any human being's capacity to learn, the new learning of each new generation is apt to be at best coextensive with its new ignorance. We cannot learn more than our teachers, nor even, when our teachers were men like Moore, can we learn as much. Our criticism of their work, accordingly, must be justified, if it can be justified at all, by difference, not excess, of knowledge.

In the present case, I run a further danger in speaking of Moore and his work from the circumstance that I never knew him personally, although many of you did. He died in the midst of his eightieth year in 1931, the year before I entered the College. He had continued teaching, however, to the age of seventy-six (in those days questions of professorial retirement were settled by consideration not of actuarial data, but of actual facts). Consequently many students less than a decade older than I had been his pupils, and most of the teachers from whom I learned most in the Divinity School—Cadbury, La Piana, Pfeiffer, Wolfson—had learned from him. From these sources, then, I first learned the Moore tradition, and found it a remarkably simple one. It was almost entirely concerned with the amazing extent of his erudition. There were very few personalia—one or two crushing retorts, the famous epigram on the Moore brothers ("There go a gentleman and a scholar"), and that was that. The other stories—and [170] they were many—were all of them accounts of the mirabilia of his learning. Thus, to judge from the oral tradition as it reached me during my days in Divinity School half a dozen years after his death, Moore had made himself, in the thought of the University, the symbol of scholarship. In him had been embodied that concern for learning which should be the core of every university. I have spoken of this first

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1 An address delivered on 21 April 1966 at the 150th Anniversary Convocation of the Harvard Divinity School.
because the impact of a man on the community in which he works is that part of his achievement most easily overlooked and most quickly forgotten, but by no means least important (particularly when the community happens to be a great university, one of the nerve centers of an enormous nation).

Of course, Moore’s impact on the community had been far more various and more specific than that effected by his embodiment of the academic ideal. The picture given me by oral tradition showed only the last phase of a ministerial and teaching career extended over more than fifty years, of which almost twenty were spent at Andover Theological Seminary as Professor of Hebrew, and almost thirty at Harvard as Professor of the History of Religion. Throughout this long career, Moore had always been active in academic affairs beyond the limits of his teaching. At Andover, particularly, he had been one of the mainstays of the Andover Review and its editor for almost ten years. At Harvard he did most of the work for the foundation of the Harvard Theological Review and was for some years its editor, as well as one of its most important contributors. The memorial minute prepared by Kittredge, Ropes, and Robinson for the Harvard University Gazette (1932, p. 106) reports that in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences “he served on important committees and was for many years a member of the Administrative Board of the Graduate School. He was also a member of the Library Council, and was much relied upon as a Syndic of the University Press.... In the Faculty of Divinity he was actively concerned with the negotiations with Andover Theological Seminary which led to the affiliation and later to the union of that institution with the Harvard Divinity School.... until ... 1926. He took his full share of the administrative work of the Divinity Faculty, and his service has left important results, especially in the organization of the general examination for the degree of Bachelor of Divinity, and in the institution of the higher degrees of Master and Doctor of Theology. In all these developments the influence of his ideas was controlling.” [171]

Given this variety of Moore’s concerns and the length of his active career, there can be no question here of discussing his achievements in detail. Yet the details should not be forgotten. Historians have a tendency to look for innovations and record them as important but to overlook the less spectacular and more important day-to-day labor of preserving routines and carrying on the functions of institutions already established. Yet even in the most revolutionary generation the amount of change is negligible by comparison with the preservation of established routines on which every society depends for its very existence; and the answer to the question, how well these routines are carried on, is a major determinant of the health of any society.