

MELAND'S PHILOSOPHICAL METHOD

No religious faith exists within a vacuum. All faiths have been confronted with the necessity of making their faith intelligible within a cultural context. We live within a scientific culture that is moving swiftly in the direction of a cybernetic culture. Of immediate concern to us is the relationship of our religious faith to this empirically oriented culture. Some years ago E. A. Burtt captured an insight into our developing situation.

The most challenging issue today—is probably this: Is the empirical method adequate in dealing with religious questions, or does it need to be supplemented by some process comparable to mystic insight.¹

B. E. Meland is an American theologian who has devoted his efforts to the relationship of faith and culture. He brings to this effort a mystical, as well as empirical orientation. At first he described his position as "mystic naturalism." At the same time he placed great emphasis upon the empirical character of the mystic experience.

The fact that the constructive trends toward a mystical outlook have been grounded in scientific interests, and not in any evangelical urge, should be encouraging. This may suggest that the return to mysticism is not an abandonment of reason, but a new integration of emotion and reason which seeks to correct the one-sided emphasis of both the rationalist and the romanticist.²

As Meland began to deal more with the relating of the mystical insight to the empirical approach, he began to describe his method as "empirical realism." His method of empirical realism always contains a dialectical encounter between mysticism and empiricism, with the encounter being developed under the headings of "faith and reason," "faith and culture," and "myth and reason."

As we attempt to deal with the relationship of our religious faith to our scientific culture, it seems valuable to examine in detail Meland's method of empirical realism. Our approach to this presentation will be as follows: (1) We shall begin with an outline of four steps in prolegomena to his method; (2) we shall present a general outline of the three basic steps in the method; (3) we shall shift our perspective

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¹E. A. Burtt, *Types of Religious Philosophy*, New York: Harper, 1939, p. 501.

²B. E. Meland, "The Mystic Returns," *Journal of Religion*, Vol. 17, p. 157.

to the relationship of "faith and culture," including a consideration of the issue of "myth and reason"; (4) we shall consider the problem of intelligibility; (5) we shall consider the relationship of philosophy to the method; and (6) we shall conclude with a summary statement on the method. By presenting the three basic steps of Meland's method, bearing in mind the prolegomena, and then approaching the method from particular perspectives with which he has been concerned, it is hoped that a richer texture of the method will become evident. Our approach has a limitation in that it will necessitate a degree of repetition, but this limitation shall prove an advantage in integrating Meland's variety of methodological interests.

Our reason for this approach arises from the manner in which Meland's theological writings have developed. Most of his books and articles have derived their existence from lecture series. These lectures have not developed in such a manner that Meland's works fall into a systematic consideration of dogmas, in the fashion of Barth or Brunner. Rather, his concern has been to speak to specific issues that were important to the group present. We mention this point because the reader cannot be referred to any of Meland's works in print for a simple and concise presentation of his method. In most of his works, he deals indirectly with the problem of method within the context of the major issue being considered. His most specific consideration is in several unpublished papers which are directed towards a consideration of different methods used in theology and philosophy. We shall include several long quotations from these in order to gain a flavor of his thought. In general, the most helpful works for the consideration of method are the earlier sections of *Faith and Culture* and *Higher Education and the Human Spirit*. The latter work is complicated in that his method is presented within the context of a philosophy of education.

I. PROLEGOMENA

Meland's theological method is basically oriented to dealing with the problem of the relationship of faith and culture, with special emphasis being given to the problem of myth and to the importance of the mythos of culture. The *prolegomena* to his method includes four steps, which focus on these issues. The first step is to gain a self-understanding of one's role as a participant in a cultural faith. This step includes the acknowledgement, as well as acceptance, of the limitations of the faith's historical witness. The second step requires an understanding of the relative situation in which each cultural witness stands. In considering this step, it is necessary to bear in mind Meland's under-

standing of the term, "relativity." The cultural relativity of faith is being asserted, but it is asserted within the understanding that, even though each faith is culturally relative, each faith to a degree contains an ultimate reference which bears some relevance to the truth of actuality. At the same time cultural relativity means that each witness is partial and limited because it speaks forth and stands in judgment of the articulate, cultural testimony. Thus, in this step an attempt is made to recognize and to understand the cultural relativity of the faith, in order that what points to an ultimate reference may be distinguished from that which is bound culturally.³

The third step deals with the problem of myth, which is an essential issue for Meland's theological position. At this point it becomes necessary to gain an understanding of the phenomenon of myth in the culture, and of the underlying mythos which shapes its orbit of meaning. The mythos is the elemental orbit of meaning in a culture which gives structure and direction at the level of the human psyche and within the realm of imaginative and cognitive experience.⁴ To participate in the mythos means that man is responsive to what is ultimate within the context of his existence. The myth is the response which a particular people makes to what is ultimate in their existence.⁵ Mythologies are explications of what is discerned or apprehended in myth. These mythologies may be transitory, but the structure and direction given to the human psyche, to imagination and cognitive experiences are enduring. People may become sophisticated to an extent and attempt to dissociate themselves from their mythos. Attempts can be made on the conscious level to "demythologize," but these attempts fail because the person is tied to the mythos on the conscious and subconscious level. Since it is impossible to break with the mythos, the importance of coming to understand the phenomena of the myth and the underlying mythos is obvious.

The fourth step requires that note should be taken of the various forms of participation in the mythos within any culture. These forms are not always easily discernable. Generally, three fairly distinct forms can be recognized: the individual, the cultus, and the secular domain. From the religious perspective, these forms have often been divided into those in the spiritual domain and those in the secular. The Roman Catholics have given special emphasis to the spiritual domain as representing those in the cultus. Protestantism has been a protest against religion in its accommodation to culture, lest it end in assimilation.

³Cf. B. E. Meland, *The Realities of Faith*, New York: Oxford University Press 1962, pp. 166-9.

⁴Cf. B. E. Meland, *Faith and Culture*, London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1955, p. 28.

⁵Cf. B. E. Meland, "Analogy and Myth in Post-Liberal Theology," unpublished, p. 14.

"The Protestant temperament is prophetic rather than priestly; it is pietistic rather than aesthetic; it is practical rather than theoretical."⁶ A church built on protest cannot be positive and constructive, and for this reason, Protestantism has never developed a social philosophy equal to achieving a cultural realization of its faith.⁷ Even if it is granted that there are boundaries between these forms of participation, an understanding of the relationships of culture asserts that there is a great deal of overlapping between these forms. At the same time, the difference between the forms has become more assertive during the last few centuries, making it imperative for theology to consider seriously the relationship of faith and culture, the individual and community, the tradition and present developing outlooks.⁸

The prolegomena to Meland's method indicate that his theology gives emphasis to the general theme of the relationship of faith and culture. The faith's historical witness must be understood, especially in the light of the relative situation in which each cultural witness stands. This understanding requires a clear insight of the phenomenon of myth in the culture, and of the underlying mythos which shapes its orbit of meaning. In order to deal with the mythos of any culture, one must have a working knowledge of the various forms of participation in the mythos.

II. THREE BASIC STEPS

Bearing in mind his basic interest of the relationship of faith and culture indicated in the prolegomena, let us turn to a general outline of the three basic steps in Meland's method. The *first step* in theological inquiry begins when man encounters his absolute limit as a creature of the earth.⁹ In this encounter faith occurs. The encounter itself is not faith; rather, God transforms man in the encounter. The result of this transformation is faith. *Meland's method begins with faith* — faith in God made possible by the transforming grace of God. With this encounter comes the realization that for true fulfilment in life one is helpless, except as help comes in the form of a good not one's own. In this appreciative awareness one understands that it is by redemptive acts that this good comes, redemptive acts in the sense that one discovers one's own extremity and the fact that one is judged

⁶B. E. Meland, "The Genius of Protestantism," *Journal of Religion*, Vol. 26, p. 275.

⁷Cf. B. E. Meland, *Faith and Culture*, pp. 80-95.

⁸This point is developed in B. E. Meland, "Tradition and New Frontiers," *Christendom*, 1940, pp. 323-31.

⁹Cf. B. E. Meland, *The Realities of Faith*, p. 8, 179. This theme of man as an "earth creature" receives special emphasis in Meland's *Modern Man's Worship* (London: Harper, 1934) and *Write Your Own Ten Commandments* (Chicago: Willett, Clark & Co., 1938).

by a good not one's own.¹⁰ When this appreciative awareness occurs, it is not some intellectual theory but something that passes into the very core of one's structured experience. This process of appreciative awareness—judgment, redemption and transformation—provides the empirical data with which the theological inquiry must begin; faith has occurred. When this empirical process has occurred, experience is never the same thereafter. The former organization and meaning is broken or reordered, and there is the discovery of a new depth of apprehension. This state of depth apprehension is designated by Meland by the following terms: "imagination" or "creative imagination," "art of imagination," "appreciative awareness," "appreciative consciousness," "religious vision," "act of faith," "mythical response," "elemental experience," and "mind-set."

Meland asserts that this transformation or new discovery can come on occasions independently of the gospel witness, making it clear that he does not subscribe to a traditional, kerygmatic theology. The sensitive experience which makes faith possible can come to one in tragedy, sorrow, frustration or failure. It is possible for these experiences to break one, but at the same time it is possible for them to open up the possibility of the redemptive process. Generally, no one experience of this character is of such a force as to bring about the apprehension of the faith-encounter, but such experiences have accumulative effect. Such an accumulation of experience can help one become more sensitive to one's own limitations in such a way that one is reoriented to the larger witness of faith. Because these experiences are contextual, it is difficult to describe them in terms which can easily be associated with each individual's forms of expression. What Meland is asserting is that there are empirically real creative situations which encounter the individual, in his routine living, in such a way that the individual is forced to take seriously his own limitations and to look to a source of strength beyond the confines of his own intellectual and feeling context. In other words, true religious inquiry is a response in some degree to encounters with actuality, which bring to

¹⁰Meland would say that this redemptive act is man's existential experience of the true meaning of Christ. From his metaphysical perspective, man is created in the elemental stage of faith and develops to the transcendental stage of faith. These two stages of faith are part of the same process, so any doctrine of creation and redemption must be considered as two stages in the same process. In other words, this is to say that the meaning of Christ cannot be considered properly except in relation to the creative functioning of God's grace. Although it is not our task to develop Meland's Christology, it should be obvious that, in his emphasis upon the primacy of faith in the redemptive act, a strong doctrine of Christ is essential to his theological position. For a more inclusive consideration of his Christology, cf. B. E. Meland, "Analogy and Myth in Post-Liberal Theology," unpublished, pp. 19-27; "The Criterion of the Religious Life," *Journal of Religion*, Vol. 19, p. 37; "A Present Day Evaluation of Christian Ethics," *Journal of Religion*, Vol. 10, p. 378; "Toward a Common Faith," *Christendom*, 1937, pp. 392-6; *Faith and Culture*, p. 85, 99, 109, 120-1, 182-4, 197-205; and *The Realities of Faith*, pp. 250-66; 267, 278ff.

the individual the realities of judgment and grace within the human situation in such a way that the individual is oriented to redemptive and redirective resources beyond the limits of his own self. Theological inquiry itself becomes an act of witnessing to the energies of the spirit which have come into the individual's life. Without witnessing to the redemptive process, there can be no true theological inquiry.

Meland is careful to point out that this apprehension of judgment and grace need not come about in the traditional form of dramatic conversion. This experience need not be dramatic, for it can occur in the silent processes of life; but it must be insistent, impelling, and crucial, in the sense that one discovers an apprehension of judgment and grace. Meland surveys the accounts of biblical and church history and sees the individual going through the life-drama of redemptive acts, moving from the level of elemental man to the level of spiritual man. His method for theological inquiry asserts the necessity of repossessing this heritage of the drama of redemptive acts as peculiarly our own as the foundation for true inquiry. If one repossesses this drama in an existential manner, then the experiences of life confront one in a redemptive manner.

The crucial fact here, however, is that one then takes a proper measure of himself as a person, or of his rational or intellectual power as a creature under God, as a creature in relation to God and to other men. One comes of age spiritually, which in part is to see the ego in one's self for all its worth and peril: the pretense, the illusion, the possibilities of deception, the over-reaching and assertive qualities of mind that are the bane of intellectualism where a sense of proportion and creatural humility do not obtain. The mind awakened to its limits ceases to be spiritually naive. But in sensing its limits, the mind achieves freedom from itself and from the tyranny of other minds. And this affords its new power and penetration.¹¹

By making the first step of theological inquiry a faith experience, Meland is presenting a form of kerygmatic theology. His form differs from traditional kerygmatic theology. His form differs from traditional kerygmatic theology because the faith-experience can occur independently of the gospel witness. At the same time it is similar to the traditional position in several ways. On the one hand, it is similar because faith occurs for both positions when man experiences the judgment and grace of God. On the other hand, both positions assert that

¹¹B. E. Meland, "A Critical Footnote, unpublished, p. 13.

the faith-experience does not require any external criterion for validation. Even though these two positions are similar, there is a basic difference. The traditional position contends that in the experience of faith man encounters the supernatural. From his naturalistic perspective, Meland contends that whatever happens, happens within the natural order; therefore, the faith-encounter is a natural experience. In a real sense, however, the division between Meland and supernaturalism on this point is not too great. Both positions assert that man has a mysterious encounter with God which can never be fully understood, and the result of this encounter is faith.

Immediately the question must be considered how this new depth of apprehension can be tested and shown to be valid. Meland rejects the view that this test can be carried out as if this depth of apprehension were a cognitive act: the immediate awareness of objects, or of behavior patterns, and later, of events. In this depth there is a dimension of knowing which is too full for words, and cognitive tests are not adequate to test the validity of this depth of apprehension. Out of situations of extremity comes a perception of judgment and grace that is swift and sure. It is true that the validity of this perception, to a degree, may be increased by a later test of applying cognitive criteria, but this added verification will always be inadequate to the depth of the experience itself and to the transformation of mind and experience which take place as a consequence. This added test really does not offer additional attestation to the reality encountered in this depth experience; it can offer only some knowledge of a usable sort. Even if it is granted that this knowledge is valuable and should be developed, it remains the case that this knowledge itself does not validate the experience.

What I am claiming is that in encounters within experience, whether in an "I-thou" relation, as it is sometimes expressed, in a vivid perception of events, momentarily heightened by their convergence in a time of crisis, or as Tillich words it, "the Kairos" of occasions, or in revelatory occasions of even greater moment when reality overturns and literally breaks as under the structures of reason, compelling the structures of man to be remade or reordered if they would survive—in encounters of this dimension and depth, there is given to the human situation insight, a reorientation of knowing, "a knowledge by acquaintance," an apprehension of judgment and grace, (what shall we call it?) that carries its own validation as a Word spoken out of the situation itself.¹²

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 6. For a discussion of the truth of the faith experience as an "aura of felt meaning," cf. B. E. Meland, "Tradition and New Frontiers," *Christendom*, 1940, p. 329.

The process of critical analysis, which is the *second step*, follows or should follow any event of disclosure and will provide a type of illumination. This illumination is important because in time it will be assimilated into the stream of creative performance. Critical analysis is important also because it offers a style of discipline by which man's creative efforts and imagination may become more open to an ever-increasing possibility of new depths of apprehension. Yet, the testing of critical analysis can never determine the actuality or value of the reality disclosed in this depth of apprehension. The disclosure itself carries its own force of authenticity as a Word given.¹³ This transforming grace never depends upon the reassurance of any external criteria.

Essentially, Meland's method of religious inquiry begins with the act of faith moving toward its disciplined utterance, instead of an intellectual process which has been dissociated from its feeling context. He does not reject the added dimensions of critical power, which the latter approach can offer to one's perception and capacity for judgment; but, rather, he asserts that the religious inquiry which follows from a "grasping" act of faith is the true religious inquiry. The faith-encounter affords the true religious inquiry, because in such an encounter the intellect and feeling context of the individual is transformed. In this transformation the intellect and feeling context is not recreated only; it is also redirected. Essentially Meland is saying that the act of faith transforms the critical process in such a way that it can function within an orientation that includes consideration of this depth of experience. Reason transformed by faith develops a depth of humility which enables it to transcend the limited reality of bare facts dependent upon pure observation and reason. When this transformed orientation occurs, it is what Meland calls "the shock of new discovery."¹⁴

The fact that reason is recreated and redirected by faith should receive special note in our consideration. The first step in Meland's method is faith made possible by an experience of God's judgment and grace. The second step, critical analysis, does not occur in a detached manner. The rational process is transformed by faith, enabling one to be more attuned to the revelation of God in order that one can gain an understanding of the meaning of this revelation in one's life. In the

¹³Meland's emphasis is similar to Barth's emphasis of listening and responding to the Word; cf. B. E. Meland, "Some Concluding Observations Concerning Theological Method," unpublished, p. 10.

¹⁴For a more complete consideration of the way faith recreates and redirects reason, cf. B. E. Meland, "Faith and Christian Thought," *The Personalist*, Vol. XXXIV, pp. 140-50; "Theology and the Historian of Religion," *Journal of Religion*, Vol. XLI, p. 271; *Faith and Culture*, pp. 22-3, 39, 115-18; and B. E. Meland, *Higher Education and the Human Spirit*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953, pp. 71-80, 159-61, 170-2.

theological inquiry, reason is of value because it has been recreated and redirected by faith.

Meland's method of theological inquiry asserts the primacy of faith, but at the same time he takes seriously the philosophical aspect of theological inquiry and pursues it as an explicit aid to the act of faith and its interpretation.¹⁵ Thus, the second step in his method is critical and analytical. Meland makes this step for both negative and positive reasons. It is his contention that one's experience of faith will fall necessarily within a contextual structure of meaning, explicitly or implicitly functioning as one's intellectual reference or working philosophy of life. If one does not explicitly use the notions of this philosophical orientation, then they will be employed unwittingly in such a way that one's affirmation of faith can be distorted into an affirmation of a philosophical bias. His positive reason is that process philosophy offers contemporary insights into the nature of reality which can help to make the Christian faith more understandable and relevant to contemporary man.

Meland asserts that there should be a tension between faith and the critical process, as between art and discipline.¹⁶ This relationship of tension is subtle and implies that neither side should ignore the other. Into the bargain neither side should confront the other in any explicit way as claiming superiority, because if such a confrontation occurs the creative tension is impaired, destroying something of the authenticity of each.

Further, critical analysis confronts seriously the biblical witness. This confrontation is two-fold; it includes a creative encounter with the gospel of judgment and grace coming to us from the Scripture and includes our being instructed by the disciplined analysis and findings of critical biblical study. This process may be called an aspect of his method, because it should be included in the second step; and yet from another perspective this aspect must become a *third step* in Meland's method for theological inquiry. There comes a time within the task of constructive theology when it becomes necessary for the individual experience to confront and to converse with the communal witness of faith. This task can be expressed by saying that the major problem of religion is the relation of the individual to the community, or it can be expressed by saying that constructive theology must grapple with the relationship of faith and culture.

In *step three* the theologian must consider seriously the historical

¹⁵Cf. B. E. Meland, "Interpreting the Christian Faith Within a Philosophical Framework". *Journal of Religion*, Vol. 33, p. 88.

¹⁶Cf. B. E. Meland, *Higher Education and the Human Spirit*, pp. 17, 94ff.

and communal witness to the Christian faith, as expressed in the revelation in Christ. It is important to note that Meland is saying that one does not begin by jumping directly into the center of the Christian witness, trying to come forth with an intelligible and meaningful interpretation of the Christian faith. To make such a jump, without developing the critical process in light of faith, is to miscalculate the relation of discipline to creative expression. If one's endeavor in any area is to be significant, it is necessary that one first accept the burden of acquiring the discipline and critical judgment necessary to this endeavor. Acquiring discipline and critical judgment may seem tedious and difficult, but these will afford one the ability to consider later, with perceptiveness and power, the more complex situation. Meland's point should be understood as a common sense insight that one is not able to deal with the more complex situations without going through the preliminary process. The method of theological inquiry is no different from other methods of inquiry, in that one must learn to crawl before one can walk.¹⁷

Meland's method can be presented more sharply if it is seen as a method of empirical realism, in which every opportunity is developed to probe both the individual experience and the communal witness to the revelatory event. The empirical character of the individual is taken seriously, that man lives within and by the faculties of his own organism. At the same time the empirical, communal character of the individual is taken into consideration, that life is organic, relations are real, and reality is social. This relationship is a creative tension. Between the individual and the community occurs a process of deep speaking to deep in which the individual judgment encounters and contends with a communal consensus and vice versa. The individual experience always occurs within the context of the communal structure of experience. Since God gives direction to the evolving structure of experience, God's judgment and grace are revealed in the individual's experience. As the tension between faith and critical analysis must be maintained, so this tension between the individual and community must be maintained. It is through this creative tension that a judgment and grace occur which are not man's own making, but which transform and redirect the life of man. If the original experiences do not include this creative tension, then the original experience will be limited so that true judgment and grace cannot be experienced. If the critical processes are not founded on this creative tension, then they

¹⁷Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 21-32. In this chapter on "The Nature of Thinking in Education," Meland develops his common-sense approach to education by pointing out six levels of thought through which man must progress in order to develop an orientation for dealing with large scale problems of human destiny.

are not functioning within the framework of faith; and if they do not include this creative tension, then they are blocking the possibility of true insight and the possibility of growth in grace.

In summary of this point, we should say that within the field of systematic theology Meland's method of empirical realism is oriented more explicitly to the task of constructive theology, than that of dogmatic theology. His starting point is the act of faith, which occurs when the individual experiences the judgment and grace of God. In the second step, the discipline of critical thought is employed for the purpose of illumining the act of faith within a relevant context of meaning. The third step, granted that aspects of this step are included in the second, requires that the individual witness to faith confront the communal witness, issuing from the biblical record and made manifest through the historic experience of the Christian church. This method of constructive theological inquiry asserts the integrity and authenticity of the individual and communal witness of faith and attempts to hold them in a relationship of creative tension, in such a way that there is a great degree of communication and interpenetration between the two.

The genius of the constructive method lies in the holding within a creative tension, individual and community, tradition and the contemporary experience, reality and the individuated though authentic human reason, the personal and the corporate witness. In this respect it is the method of a critical liberalism which takes the claim and protests of the human spirit seriously; yet compels it to confront its heritage and the consensus of tradition responsibly. The freedom of individuality is not to be looked upon as an *acid of modernity* that dissolves the tissues of relationships, leaving in tatters the communal fabric of faith; it is to be taken as a summons to maturity and thus to respond as one comes of age within the community of a social reality, consonant with the Christian understanding of the *imago-dei*.¹⁸

¹⁸B. E. Meland, "A Critical Footnote," unpublished, p. 20.

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