

SHAILER MATHEWS' RELIGION OF COSMIC ADJUSTMENT

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By the middle of the Nineteenth Century religion, philosophy and social theory in the United States had been welded into a unified set of beliefs about the nature of the Universe. On the one hand, the central feature of this view was its strong assurance of the fundamental moral order of the cosmos. On the other hand, this feature was expressed in its hardwon affirmation of an individual's moral freedom as part of this moral order. Evil did exist, but basically the universe was orderly and beneficent. The pattern of history was upward. People and nations were moving to new heights of culture and morality. This view was supported by "the philosophy of common sense" which had originated in Scotland in response to the skepticism of David Hume. This philosophy was at once empirical and intuitive. Religion and science went hand in hand, since it was taken for granted that the insights of the natural sciences would reinforce the revelations of scripture.

Darwin and the developing theory of evolution exploded America's unified set of beliefs. The Darwinian theory of evolution called into question the fundamental notion of there being a universal moral order and left humans with the random movement of undirected forces endlessly shifting and shaping all things. In place of moral freedom one was confronted with a stern biological determinism. Orthodox religion could no longer look to science for supporting the validity of its scriptural revelation. Also gone was the argument for the existence of God based on cosmic design. The common sense and optimistic democratic faith in the value of each individual was under attack by nature and God, if one could speak of God, demonstrated to support not the preservation of the individual but of the type. It is mild to say that Darwinism posed a massive challenge to the stability of American thought, especially American religious thought.

An important part of the response to this challenge by the American religious community is known as "Liberalism." This position basically attempted to include the empirical orientation of the natural and social sciences in its study of tradition, as well as in the application of tradition in the present and the future. In its various movements over several decades, this position encompasses Modernism, the social gospel, religious humanism, and process theology. Key lead-

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ing voices, originally undergirding, developing and giving direction to this position were at the University of Chicago and have come to be known in American thought as "The Chicago-school."

The Chicago-school as a distinct influence in American religious thought begins with the work of Shailer Mathews, who joined the faculty at Chicago in 1894. Mathews, the leader of the early Chicago-school, served as Professor of New Testament History, later as Professor of Historical and Comparative Theology, and for many years also as Dean of The Divinity School. He begins from the perspective of an evangelical liberal theology, as can be seen in *The Social Teaching of Jesus*, and moves in the direction of a sociological empirical theology. This shift in emphasis comes with a change in his professional chairs and becomes evident in *The Church and the Changing Order*. He always considers his type of socio-empirical theology to be within the general scope of Liberalism or Modernism. He offers as a summary of Modernism:

1. The Modernist movement is a phase of the scientific struggle for freedom in thought and belief. . .
2. Modernist are Christians who accept the results of scientific research as data with which to think religiously. . .
3. Modernist are Christians who adopt the method of historical and literary science in the study of the Bible and religion. . .
4. The Modernist Christian believes the Christian religion will help men meet social as well as individual needs. . .
5. The Modernist is a Christian who believes that the spiritual and moral needs of the world can be met because he is intellectually convinced that Christian attitudes and faiths are consistent with other realities. . .
6. Modernists as a class are evangelical Christians. That is... they accept Jesus Christ as the revelation of a Savior God. . . In brief, then, *the use of scientific, historical, social method in understanding and applying evangelical Christianity to the needs of living persons, is Modernism.*¹

It was Mathews contention that today we are "living in the most *extraordinary* intellectual transition the world has ever seen." His only comparison for the transition facing us is the one made by the early church as it came under the influence of neo-Platonic philos-

¹Shailer Mathews, *Faith of Modernism*. New York: Macmillan, 1924, p. 23-25.

ophy.² He felt that "no religious faith can be satisfactory that is out of harmony with what have been shown to be the facts of the universe."³ Since the concept of evolution stood as a symbol of our new understanding of reality, Mathews' Modernism increasingly incorporates an evolutionary emphasis.

The Modernist is as emphatic, and might almost say as vehement, in his denial that evolution is a Godless impersonal process, as is the most vigorous champion of super- (or contra-) naturalism. . . The evolutionary process is, so to speak, a moving picture of an infinite number of acts of God immanent in the universe and gradually imparting personality to that which, already in existence, grows more capable of personal action as its structure grows more complicated. Evolution is thus the history of an ever more complete revelation of how the infinite Person produces finite personalities.⁴

From his historical, socio-empirical perspective, Mathews asserts a practical, functional view of religion. He asks the question, "What is religion?" and answers it with the assertion that it is a series of historical, social experiments based on human needs. The social acts are an attempt on the part of humans to ward off danger by attempting to relate and to adjust to a superhuman force within the cosmic process.

Religion is life functioning in the interest of self-protection. It differs from similar functional expressions of life in that (1) it treats certain elements of its environment personally (though not necessarily as a person), by utilizing social practices and ideas as forms of worship, or as patterns for beliefs, and (2) it seeks to make these elements friendly and so helpful.⁵

Mathews asserts that the concept of God can be approached from either the discipline of philosophy and metaphysics or from the discipline of religion. He rejects the approach of philosophy and metaphysics because it is tied to pure abstract speculation which is not related to reality; "religious faith is either consistent or inconsistent with reality."⁶ For him religion is based on empirical social develop-

²Cf. Shailer Mathews, "Awakening of American Protestantism," *Constructive Quarterly*, Vol. 1, March 1913, p. 102.

³Shailer Mathews, *Is God Emeritus?* New York: Macmillan, 1940, p. 28.

⁴Shailer Mathews, *Faith of Modernism*, p. 115.

⁵Shailer Mathews (ed.), *Contributions of Science to Religion*. New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1924, p. 255.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 11.

ment and, therefore, must be the basis for a true conceptual understanding of God.

It is to make evident that religion can be regarded as a series of experiments extending across thousands of years and involving a vast number of accumulated actions and convictions. *It is not a philosophy, but a mode of vital action.* Instead of starting with a metaphysical postulate we trace in religion humanity's empirical search after larger and more personal life.⁷

With an increasing evolutionary perspective, Mathews gives greater emphasis to religion as a functional process of adjustment to the personality-producing activities of the Cosmos. He continues to emphasize the social acts of religion but places them in a wider context than the immediate environment of the individual or the group, namely the environment of cosmic mystery.

Religion thus becomes more than conventional behavior. It is a technique by which the human being gains more personal value from personal adjustment with responsive cosmic activities. It would be difficult for any political or even parental conception of God to be regarded as expressing this conception accurately. It is more likely to be cast in the pattern of organic life itself, or the relations of the individual to the group. . . . An exact definition of God is less basic than a direct adjustment to those cosmic activities which the word God represents.⁸

Based on his socio-cosmic empirical approach to religion, Mathews affirms a functional criterion for determining the value, meaningfulness or truth of religion. Right doctrines are not the essential things of religion. What is essential in religion are its attitudes and convictions. "This historical study enables us to recognize that the permanent element of our evolving religion resides in attitudes and convictions rather than in doctrines."⁹ It is these attitudes and convictions which enable the individual and the group to relate themselves to those activities which meet their needs. When religion is conceived as a way of meeting human needs the crucial issue is not one of truth but one of pragmatic efficiency, and it is on the basis of efficiency that religion is to be evaluated. "The efficiency of a religion will be measured by the efficiency of its patterns to integrate human life with those elements of the known universe capable of

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 384.

⁸Shailer Mathews, *The Growth of the Idea of God*. New York: Macmillan, 1931, p. 232-3.

⁹Shailer Mathews, *Faith of Modernism*, p. 76.

satisfying personal needs.”¹⁰ A quotation from J. Gresham Machen offers a striking contrast, from the perspective of a more conservative position, to the view which Mathews holds.

...if any one fact is clear...it is that the Christian movement from its inception was not just a way of life in the modern sense, but a way of life founded upon a message. It was based, not upon a mere program of work, but upon an account of facts. In other words it was based upon doctrine.¹¹

Mathews considers the Christian religion in the light of his general view of religion. From his Christological perspective he asserts that the Christian religion is Christ's way of laying hold on God in order to meet man's functional religious needs.

The Christian religion is Christ's way of laying hold on God, of ordering of life which makes it possible for God to help. It is not the product of merely intellectual processes. It embodies the urge of life itself.¹²

With his emphasis upon social acts, Mathews sees the Christian religion as the reproduction of attitudes and convictions in those who stand within the particular religious tradition rather than the acceptance of doctrines, dogmas or literature. “Christianity becomes not the acceptance of a literature but a reproduction of attitudes and faith, a fellowship with those ancient men of imperfect morals whose hearts found God, whose lives were strengthened by the divine spirit, whose works point out the way of life and who determined the inner character of the Christian religion.”¹³ The Christian religion is not a static religion based on a particular past revelation; “the unity of the Christian revelation is found in the unity of a growing religion.”¹⁴ Progress in the Christian religion depends upon its ability to grow and meet the needs of succeeding generations; “by accustoming Christians through discussion to patterns codifying new applications of Christian attitudes, progress in religion is made possible.”¹⁵ As Mathews' thoughts increasingly emphasize evolution, he defines the nature of the Christian religion in terms of cosmic adjustment based on empirical attitudes as well as in terms of environmental social adjustment.

¹⁰Shailer Mathews, *The Growth of the Idea of God*, p. 215.

¹¹J. G. Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*. New York: Macmillan, 1923, p. 12.

¹²Shailer Mathews. *Faith of Modernism*, p. 85-6.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 49.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 50.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 75.

We shall be less concerned with patterns than with the proper way of adjusting human lives to an increasingly complicated social order, to their own capacities, to cosmic reason and purpose increasingly discoverable to the human mind and incarnate in Jesus. We may be decreasingly interested in the metaphysics of Jesus Christ, but we shall be all the more determined to show that his life and teachings reveal the divine purpose in humanity and therefore it is practicable to organize life upon his revelation of good will.¹⁶

With Mathews' view of religion in mind, it is easy to see that his method is based primarily upon a historical and general social science perspective and to a lesser degree upon the natural sciences. He considers the philosophical and metaphysical positions included in the social and natural sciences to be related to objective reality and, therefore, not to be identified with philosophy or metaphysics in the sense of abstract thought which is unrelated to reality. Even though he asserts that these sciences point to mystery in the universe, a mystery which he designates as God, he disassociates this mystery from his understanding of mysticism, because for him mysticism is not related to reality. In general it could be said that Mathews employed a historical method, based upon the presupposition that religious faith must be consistent with reality. Since he rejects the view that the essential factors of religion are doctrines, creeds, dogmas or literature and asserts that the essential factors are attitudes and convictions arise in order that modern persons can implement them based on his "pattern theory."

If we are to understand our religion we must, therefore, do more than study its formulas and institutions. We must look beneath and through the Creeds and Confessions to the attitudes and convictions, the needs, temptations and trials, the prayer and rites, in a word, the actual religious life of the ongoing and developing Christian group. We must discover when a doctrine arose, for what purpose it was organized, what religious attitude is expressed, what unifying social practice or idea is used as a "pattern." From such a study the conclusion will be clear that while formulae are a part of our religion they are not to be identified with that religion. They spring from the effort of Christians in different situations to organize their lives and carry their daily burdens, perform their varying tasks, not only with prayer and

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 175.

sacrifice but in loyalty to the inherited attitudes and convictions of their group regarding God and Jesus Christ.

Nor is this all. A study of the origin and purpose of our doctrines shows how patterns have originated and served actual needs of a group.¹⁷

Having dissociated the pattern from a literal interpretation of the doctrine, Mathews considers the pattern an analogy. By considering the analogy in relation to practices of the religious community, it is possible to discover the particular attitudes involved. Mathews asserts that the pattern of a past group will not have the same authority for today, when this pattern is understood as an analogy. What is necessary is the development of a new and more relevant pattern for these basic attitudes which will serve not merely as an analogy but will represent the reality which the individual and group experiences. An example of what he means by "pattern" is to be seen in Mathews' treatment of the death and resurrection of Christ. He asserts that the basic attitudes and convictions involved can be explained today in terms of the theory of evolution.

*The death and resurrection of Christ helps us interpret that long evolutionary struggle from which human life has emerged and which it carries on. A life which is superior to the circumstances of the impersonal world and capable of moral perfection, is in consequence superior to death. In this sense of embodying the end of human evolution, Jesus in his life and death and resurrection reveals the meaning of that process from which men have come and of which they are a part and from which they suffer. It is the production of individuals renewed by fellowship with God, secure in personal freedom, and triumphing over the backward pull of inheritances by living a life of good will in the midst of help-giving spiritual realities.*¹⁸

His criterion for developing contemporary patterns is that they must be more than meaningful, for they must be in accordance with our understanding of what is actual. In his later writings, he asserts that this pattern for modern persons is to be that of an organism in relation to its particular and cosmic environment.¹⁹

This is the pattern which we can use in religion. The individual is in personal relation with those personality-evolving elements

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 58-9.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 161.

¹⁹Shailer Mathews, *The Atonement and the Social Process*. New York: Macmillan, 1930, p. 184-5.

of an environing process as he is to society. Such a pattern, born of biology and sociology, lies outside discussion of immanence and transcendence. Were not the expression so paradoxical, it might almost be called a distributive monism, since the ultimate reality we can imagine or infer is activity from which we select personality-producing elements as distinct from others. For religious purposes it is enough to hold that human life is conditioned by a relationship to an eternally creative environment in the midst of which are continuing forces that have produced personality and with which relations can and must be set up which advance personality. To such elements of the environment activity which demand and permit appropriation of the plane of personality and which can be seen in the intelligibility of all nature, we give the name God. He is the "you" of the cosmic process. . .

In so saying we do not personify the universe, and we are the farthest possible from pantheism. We are using a pattern and not a metaphysic.²⁰

Mathews' doctrine of God is a mixture of his socio-empirical view and his cosmic-empirical view. In his earlier writings he approached God through the understanding of Jesus Christ wielded by his "pattern" theory. Christians developed concepts of God based on their understanding of the attitudes of Christ and based on their adjustment of these attitudes to patterns which were socially, politically and economically relevant. His favorite illustration is the concept of God as King. It is his view that with the development of democracy, an industrial economy, and the thought-patterns of science, the concept of God as king has lost its meaning and more adequate concepts must be developed.

As over against the old conception of royal sovereignty external to and not dependent upon the nation, we have the conception of sovereignty immanent in the nation itself, but transcendental to that nation when expressing itself in governmental forms. In the case of American law, government with sovereignty expressed in the judicial, legislative, and executive elements, might even serve as a pattern for the Trinity. Our group experience, through free discussion, will find an analogy which will express the profound religious conviction that while God is immanent in nature he also must be thought of as expressing himself objectively to that nature, especially to humanity. The process of making this theology does not involve transformation of values and attitudes

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 186-7.

which older theologies expressed for their authors, but rather the discovery of certain social practices and experiences, which as patterns will actually and constructively express our religious loyalties and beliefs. Theology will change but Christian experience and faith embodied in the Christian movement will continue.²¹

Mathews asserts that personality is the most important feature of existence. He presents his "conceptual theism" view of God as those personality activities of the Cosmos. God becomes that force in the cosmos which functions to meet our religious needs. "*For God is our conception, born of the personality-evolving and personally responsive elements of our cosmic environment with which we are organically related.*"²² Mathews is careful always to assert that the God of his concept is not limited to the conceptual activities under consideration. "The word God stands for neither the concept alone nor the activities alone, any more than the word friend stands for a sentiment or a human body. It expresses a reality because it expresses and furthers the relation between existence."²³ That God is an objective reality is important to Mathews' position. He also asserts that the objective reality of the cosmic activities which he designates as God can be proved on "the evidence of observation."²⁴ In general he asserts that his concept of God can stand the test of experimental validation just as well as any of the ideas evaluated by science.

The conception of God is no more illusion than the scientist's conception of the electron. Both are subject to experimental validation. Men's tentative search for cosmic adjustment and personal values conditioned by such a concept need no more fear frustration than does the adjustment of other aspects of our life to the imperfectly understood but experientially accepted forces of electricity, gravitation, and light. In the struggles of life for higher social and individual goods, men are enabled by the use of a personal pattern to set up personal adjustment with those personality-producing activities of the cosmos by which they were evolved and on which they depend. In such relation there is help and happiness. For we are not comrades in doom but children of hope. We are organically one with those cosmic activities we know as God.²⁵

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 28.

²²Shailer Mathews, *The Growth of the Idea of God*, p. 226.

²³*Ibid.*, p. 219.

²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 217.

²⁵*Ibid.*, p. 234.

To suggest that Mathews' method and general position is scientific is an over-statement. He was not trained technically and never becomes involved in a technical understanding of the patterns which he adopts from science. His theological approach is rather a mixture of evolutionary and social optimism historical criticism, and some metaphysics of organism. The important contribution of Mathews is that he brought the social factors of religion into organic relationship with the witness of faith itself. His cosmic emphasis is never fully integrated with his stress upon social acts, but even side by side they indicate the direction which the Chicago-school was to introduce to American religious thought.

In brief, therefore, we can see that science is contributing not only a method of testing the legitimacy and value of religion, but also it is giving up thought-patterns with which one may set forth its nature. For we always live in new conditions by the use of patterns drawn from experience already possessed. When the highest reach of experience was that of the state, men organized their lives with the universe imperfectly but to their best possible advantage through the pattern ideas of the state. But now as science has enabled us to get glimpses of reality, of cosmic process and of life, it is giving us far more inclusive and improved pattern ideas. These pattern ideas of science enable us effectively to coordinate with other realities the urge to protect and enrich life by seeking help personally from the environment in which personalities find themselves.²⁶

²⁶Shailer Mathews (ed.), *Contributions of Science to Religion*, p. 402.

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