

Wieman's View of Religion

W. CREIGHTON PEDEN

DR. GEORGE HAMMAR of Uppsala University, writing in 1938 about American theology, said: "The two most significant names of American theology today... are Henry Nelson Wieman and Reinhold Niebuhr."¹ The impact of Henry Nelson Wieman on American theology began in 1926. In that year he wrote **Religious Experience and the Scientific Method**, in which he attempted to develop an empirical view of religion based on the metaphysical implications in the writings of A. N. Whitehead. The impact of this publication was decisive for the most crucial theological issue in America in the 1920's, especially for those in the liberal tradition, which was the issue of theism. The ethical movement in American theology had become so strong that for many years there was a rejection of any serious interest in the reality of God. This view might be expressed in the following way: "If we have the choice between Jesus and a God who is not as good as Jesus, then there is no choice. We must choose Jesus." In effect American liberal religion had become a type of religion humanism. To a great degree this mood was an affirmation of humanism after a pattern of the human Jesus. With the lessening emphasis on the human Jesus after World War I, the scene was set for the natural development of humanism. Unless one stood in one of the traditions of philosophical idealism, one appeared to have no alternative route, after this rejection, to theism.

Similar to the current "God is dead" debate, the crucial issue of the time was

whether one could continue speaking of the existence of God as a concrete reality, and to this issue Wieman spoke as a fresh voice. Wieman did two things at this point. First he redefined the question of theism. He argued that the question, "Does God exist?", is not the real question. So long as the wrong question is asked, it is not possible to give the right answer. Wieman asserted that God is that Something in our environment, however defined, upon which man is dependent for his security, welfare, and increasing abundance. The true question is "What is the character of this Something upon which man is dependent for his salvation?"

My own purpose is a very earnest and a very serious one. It is so to formulate the idea of God that the question of God's existence becomes a dead issue, like the question of other inescapable forms of natural existence, and all our energies can be turned to living for God and seeking better knowledge about God.²

The second thing Wieman did was to assert a method by which theology could understand the character of this Something. This method was essentially an adaptation of the scientific method of the natural sciences. It is not our purpose to imply that Wieman's method was fully developed at this time, but the essential structure of his method was set.

A very just comparison has been made between Henry Nelson Wieman and Karth Barth. It has been suggested that Wieman did for liberal American theology what Barth had done for Continental theology some years earlier. Both men attempted to turn theology away from the preoccupation with a religion of ideals and to direct theology to the sovereign and ultimate God beyond our human ideals. Granted that

¹ George Hammar, *Christian Realism in Contemporary American Theology*, p. 72.

W. CREIGHTON PEDEN is Associate Professor of Philosophy and Religion at Radford College.

² H. N. Wieman, *Is There A God?*, p. 276.

these men are miles apart in the language and method used, their intentions on this point seem to have been similar. It would be possible to include also Reinhold Niebuhr, in his earlier writings, in this comparison, as Niebuhr, in **Does Civilization Need Religion?**, attacks a religion which is based on ideals and not on the sovereign God. The relationship of these men's purposes has often been overlooked because the theological systems differ. Wieman used the new metaphysics of organism or process and an expansion of the scientific method, while Barth and Niebuhr were oriented in their own way to the neo-Reformation way of thought. The important thing, however, is that both schools of thought were carrying on a line of attack against philosophical idealism, especially in the form of religious humanism.

Wieman spoke to a particular situation in such a way that he made a dynamic impact upon the American theological scene. Out of the decay of the liberal, social religion, humanism was becoming a very live alternative. Wieman redefined the issue and offered a method for dealing with it. His significance is not that he defeated humanism, for it has continued to flower. Wieman's significance lies in the fact that he redefined the issue and presented a method by which at least one segment of the theological community is able to carry on a more fruitful inquiry. One result of this inquiry for Wieman is a view of religion which can be relevant to the religious needs of contemporary man.

Humanism, in both its secular and religious forms, is becoming or is the dominant expression of American culture. Many feel that the mainstream of American Protestant theology, attempting to adapt the new-Orthodox theology of Europe, does not and can not offer a relevant view of religion to our indigenous culture. Realizing the rising tide of humanism and the possible plight of American neo-Orthodox theology to confront in a relevant manner

this tide, Wieman's view of religion should receive special consideration for at least two reasons. On the one hand, Wieman's view of religion should be taken seriously, from a historical perspective, for his contribution as a uniquely American theologian. On the other hand, in light of the rising tide of religious humanism, American theology should give serious consideration to the insights of Wieman's view of religion, as we continually accept the responsibility of attempting to make the Gospel relevant to man in our ever changing cultural situation.

In one sense Henry Nelson Wieman's view of religion can be stated simply: Religion is man's effort to discover what in human existence saves him, and then it is his self-commitment to this saving function by creating the conditions required in order that the salvation can occur. The simple statement offers in essence Wieman's view, but it does not make clear the richness of his thought on the subject. In an attempt to bring out this richness, we shall consider the subject from the following perspectives: (1) the way in which he defines religion, (2) his view of the religious quest, (3) the function of religion, (4) the role of mysticism in religion, (5) contemporary dangers in religion, and (6) the true, liberal religion.

From the beginning of Wieman's theological writing, he has viewed religion as a way of life in which man seeks and commits himself to the God functioning within the universe and within human experience in a saving manner. In his earlier writings religion was represented as man's ultimate concern rather than as ultimate commitment, although the element of commitment was very real. At this stage, religion was designated as a way of life in which man tried to find that adjustment to the conditioning factors of his environment which would yield the most abundant life. The realm of unattained possibilities and the conditions necessary for their attainment are of

primary importance to religion, because it is in the realization of these un-attained possibilities that man encounters the will of God and also realizes his human responsibilities in relation to the saving functioning of God. In essence, religion is man's attempt to adjust to all the facts of human existence, including the super-human possibilities, in such a way that man is being saved. The test of whether the religion is true depends on whether the results are such that man better understands that which saves and is able to make the necessary adjustments to that which saves.

A religion is true insofar as it consists of those concepts and convictions which correctly define the ultimate cause and supreme good for the individual under consideration and best enable him to make that adjustment which will yield for him his supreme good.³

With the publication of **Man's Ultimate Commitment**, Wieman developed a different emphasis in his view of religion. Previously the emphasis had been upon religion as that way of life about which man is ultimately concerned. Now the emphasis is upon religion as that to which man is ultimately committed. "Philosophy is ultimate concern. Religion is ultimate commitment and nothing less."⁴ Religion is defined now as that commitment man makes to what he believes to be of such character and power that it will transform man as he cannot do himself, that it will save man from his self-destructive propensities and lead him to the fullest human life possible, provided man meets the required conditions.

Wieman has defined religion as being man's adjustment or commitment to that which saves man, and it is in light of this definition that he approaches the religious quest. He asserts that his

definition of religion is true because the common element of all religion is concern for and commitment to that which saves.

Any definition is true if it selects some element always present in religion and not present in anything else and defines religion in terms of that element.⁵

It is natural that Wieman assumes that the religious quest is for that object which is the foundation of this common element of all religions.

In his earlier years (1920 and 1930), the religious quest was centered on that total object which would render all experience significant and bring human life to its highest pitch of enrichment and interest. In his later writings (1940's), the religious quest becomes a seeking after an absolute commitment to the total will of God, even before this will is known fully. None the less, there is a balancing emphasis upon the necessity of man's using the proper method for finding out the will of God on the basis of his human experiences. By the 1940's, the religious quest can be stated more simply: "What shall I do to be saved from the death of my own true self under the suffocating imposition of this automatic and trivial existence?"⁶ Within the context of this basic religious question, there are three subsidiary religious questions.

What is the evil from which man needs to be saved? What is the good to which he can be saved? What are the conditions which must be met before this saving power can operate effectively?⁷

The religious quest is no longer the seeking of that cosmological process in the universe which brings about highest value. The true religious quest is a contextual problem; it is to find out the way of God with mankind and to

³ H. N. Wieman, *The Wrestle of Religion With Truth*, p. 166.

⁴ H. N. Wieman, *Man's Ultimate Commitment*, p. 5.

⁵ H. N. Wieman, "What Is the Good of Religion", p. 2. Unpublished, 1960.

⁶ H. N. Wieman, *Man's Ultimate Commitment*, p. 5.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

make an absolute commitment to this God by meeting the required conditions of the will of God.

... the way of God with mankind, that and that only concerns religious inquiry, because religion has to do with the relation of God to man, not the relation of God to dinosaurs and dodos.⁸

In light of his definition of religion and the religious quest, Wieman attempts to explain the function of religion. In his earlier writings, he speaks of the function of religion as that of helping man to create proper habit-formations and of giving man a surplus energy for creative living.

Religion has a twofold part to play in habit-formation. It gives one that profound, earnest, comprehensive and critical survey of the greatest needs of life, which is required in order to choose wisely what habits to cultivate. And then it adds a self-surrender, a devotion and enthusiasm, which renders the method of cultivating habit exceeding more effective.⁹

Religion is the great provider of this surplus because it (1) brings about that physiological adjustment through which energy is relaxed and (2) brings peace of mind by removing those mental conflicts which block and divert the vital energies before they can be expended in action.¹⁰

In essence he is saying, at this point, that the function of religion is to help man become sensitive to the process and possibilities of highest value and to quicken to the maximum this interest. In his latest writings (1950-1960), Wieman asserts that the function of religion is "to point the way of salvation."¹¹ The true function is not just to cause man to be more sensitive, but it is to lead man to commit himself to the God who saves and to lead man to live

the conditions necessary for this salvation.

The function of religion is to lead men to commit themselves to that basic creativity which transforms them as they cannot transform themselves, to expand indefinitely the range of what they can appreciate as good and distinguish as evil, can understand in themselves and in other people.¹²

Wieman comes to assert that, if religion is to carry out its function, it must be basically mystical in form. His definition of mysticism is as follows: "Mysticism is when there is a breakthrough in personality forms which are followed by the consummatory stage of higher integration."¹³ For Wieman, religious mysticism is an attitude of responsiveness to the undiscovered possibilities of God. There is untold value in the mystical attitude because it engenders a striving to the unknown that nothing can daunt. The other major value of mysticism is that it produces a state of contemplation in which man becomes free from any limiting factors which older forms of faith might impose. In essence, mysticism is the creation of that attitude of intense awareness of the religious data about which Wieman was so concerned in his scientific method. So far we have considered only half of Wieman's definition of mysticism. The first half of mysticism is the creation of such an attitude that man has a vital consciousness of the religious experience. Wieman, however, asserts that for mysticism to be valid there must be a second stage, which is the consummatory stage of higher integration of the meaning of the religious experience by the person in relation to his own personality. It is not enough to have the intensely religious experience; man must use his human rational facilities for understanding the exper-

⁸ H. N. Wieman, "The Ways of God With Man", *Iliff Review*, Vol. 19, p. 41.

⁹ H. N. Wieman, *The Wrestle of Religion With Truth*, p. 100.

¹⁰ H. N. Wieman, *Methods of Private Religious Living*, pp. 41-2.

¹¹ H. N. Wieman, *Intellectual Foundations of Faith*, p. 80.

¹² H. N. Wieman, "What Is the Good of Religion", p. 10. Unpublished, 1960.

¹³ H. N. Wieman, "The Problem of Mysticism," A. P. Stiernotte (ed.), *Mysticism and the Modern World*, p. 23.

ience in order that he can make the true faith-commitment. To carry out the function of religion, one must help people to have the religious experience and then help them to understand the meaning of the experience in order that they can make the religious commitment, which includes man's acceptance of the responsibility to create the conditions in which the religious experience can occur. Thus, the function of religion is to help man engage in the true mystical experience. Religion functioning as it should is mysticism.

Having described the type of religion which he considers to be proper, Wieman evaluates the dangers for religion today, in order to demonstrate that his view of religion is adequate to meet the needs of the present situation in a constructive fashion. We shall approach his evaluation from three subheadings: (1) the general situation, (2) the limits of supernaturalism, and (3) the limits of traditional liberalism. The second and third headings are in fact part of the general situation of religion today, but we give them special consideration because of their specific importance in Wieman's evaluation.

In evaluating the contemporary situation of religion, Wieman is not concerned that man will cease to experience God; rather, his concern is that man's understanding of God's will will become more and more inadequate for meeting the requirements of living in our complex scientific and technological age. For religion to be adequate in the present age, it needs to include all the insights which science and technology offer.

The danger is not that we shall cease to be religious, but that the quality of our religion will decline. Men will not cease to experience God, but their understanding of God will become more and more inadequate to the requirements of our life. Religion needs science as much as science needs religion.¹⁴

¹⁴ H. N. Wieman, *Religious Experience and Scientific Method*, p. 42.

Because of the complexities of our culture, religion seems to have outgrown for many the forms of appreciative apprehension by which the individual is able to discern the realities which command the highest devotion in life. Religion is degenerating because it is not being progressively redirected and amplified by an adequate religious philosophy and, in light of this philosophy, by helpful religious fellowship, and by meditation. Wieman is very critical of the limitations of institutional religion. He asserts that institutional religion blocks man from understanding the will of God by an overemphasis upon sentimentality and the use of evocative words. What is needed is that man should be freed from the socially accepted institutional religious practices and beliefs, in order that the individual can work out his own personal religious practices and beliefs for himself. The view just expressed represents Wieman during the first stage of his theological development. In the late 1930's, Wieman develops a greater social interest and, with this interest, a greater realization of the value of traditional and institutional religion.

Although Wieman comes to appreciate more the value of religious traditions and institutions, his attack upon the contemporary forms of religion becomes sharper, in light of his social concerns. He is very critical of the older forms of religion active today because he considers them to be inadequate for guiding man in his use of the greater power available through science and technology.

We must achieve some new formulation of the old faith by which our fathers lived. The new formulation must state more explicitly in terms of rational empirical findings what we serve supremely and whereunto the deepest currents of our lives shall flow. The dogmatism, super-rationalities, paradoxes and super-empirical claims which have so frequently excluded the tests of inquiry may have been relatively harmless in the past except for a few inquisitions, a few thousand burnings and torturings of

individuals . . . A faith now shaped by such findings turns to widespread doom in a world like ours.¹⁵

What has happened is that the old forms of religion in today's situation have offered to man a distorted faith. For many, faith is no longer a commitment to God which demands that man consciously experiment to live within the will of God; rather, faith has become assent to doctrines and ceremonies. Even though many religious leaders say that this is not the faith to which they call men, in reality it is because they offer man faith without the necessity of man's faith resting upon tested knowledge. What is needed is not a distorted or cheap faith, but a faith which calls man to take part in the religious inquiry into salvation and man's participation in it. What is needed today is a new form of the old faith, in order that man can use the potentialities of his civilization in such a way as to release its power in accordance with the will of God. Wieman asserts that there are at least three things this new form of the old faith must do, if it is to enable man to serve effectively the will of God in our present age.

Three things at least must be done if the conditions are to be provided that will permit creative interchange to bring forth constructively the new age: First, the full power of technology must be released to serve the needs of the common man. Second, responsible functional participation must be given to the common man in maintaining the social order. Third, the reality commanding religious devotion must be so interpreted that technology and intelligence can be given to its service. These are the conditions we must establish if we would serve effectively the creative power to which we give ourselves in faith.¹⁶

Wieman realizes that the **supernatural form of the Christian religion**

is the dominant voice today. Although he asserts that he is indebted to many of its leading theologians, he is at the same time very critical of this expression of the Christian faith today. In essence, Wieman asserts that supernaturalism has attempted to preserve the ancient faith in its old form and in doing this has lost the proper connection with modern life. Being a temporal being, man can experience and gain knowledge only within the temporal order. Since supernaturalism places God outside of time, man in the temporal order is cut off from God who is outside of time. This religious form also asserts that this non-temporal God is almighty, and this assertion is completely beyond what limited man can experience and understand. Supernaturalism creates an illusion which cuts man off from God and robs man of any form of cosmic destiny.

The illusion developed by religion is that an eternity stands in contrast to temporal existence and that this eternity is free of all evils of time, is the home of transcendent values having some kind of mysterious concreteness yet not characterized in space and time. Eternity is said to be "beyond history" infinitely better than anything to be experienced in the temporal world.¹⁷

This illusion presented by supernaturalism is basically evil because it does two things: (1) it diverts man's energy and devotion for the actual problems of his own existence, and (2) it misdirects the devotion and the striving of man to ends other than the will of God and its fulfillment in his own human life. In essence, supernaturalism turns man away from the God he experiences and from understanding and fulfilling the will of God which is revealed in human experience. Because religion has the responsibility of directing man to God, supernaturalism must take the blame for the consequences which occur when it turns man away from God to an illusion.

¹⁵ H. N. Wieman, *Now We Must Choose*, pp. 208-9.

¹⁶ H. N. Wieman, *The Directive In History*, p. 134.

¹⁷ H. N. Wieman, "The Creativity in History," p. 4. Unpublished, 1962.

In all cases the agency chiefly responsible for this decline and self destruction is religion because religion directs the ruling devotion of the lives of men, or at least has the responsibility for doing so. If it does not direct the ruling devotion, and thereby the resources for inquiry and control, to the problems that must be solved to avoid self-destruction and attain the greater good it must take the blame for the consequences.¹⁸

Although Wieman considers himself a liberal, he offers as much criticism of **traditional liberalism** as of supernaturalism. In an attempt to meet the religious needs of man in a changing and complex time, liberalism placed the emphasis upon religious experience or beliefs which would yield the desired religious experience. "The older liberalism tried to overcome the rational absurdity by constructing a metaphysics or a cosmology or some other device with which to justify the belief yielding the desired religious experience."¹⁹ Wieman contends that in its attempt liberalism did not retain the essential truth of the ancient faith and was not true to the spirit of science. This failure of liberalism was due basically to its faulty method.

It did not retain the essential truth of the ancient faith and neither was it true to that spirit of science which ruled and shaped the modern mind. It tried to introduce the empirical method into religion by basing it upon religious experience but without making clear what was the nature of religious experience and how it was to be treated scientifically. It left out the heart of science, on the one hand, and the heart of religion on the other.²⁰

In essence, Wieman accuses liberalism of being immature and irresponsible and, therefore, of not being able to help man meet the religious needs which our

time demands. He offers a very lengthy list of reasons for saying that liberalism is immature and irresponsible.

... because it lacks clarity and agreement on what has the character and power to save human kind from self-destructive propensities and lead to the best that human life can ever attain ... because it does not even undertake persistent and devoted inquiry to discover and demonstrate and communicate what does in truth have this character and power. Rather it leaves this most difficult and profound problem to the casual and uninstructed thinking of each individual ... because it does not set up institutions so endowed and equipped that dedicated men can give their whole lives to inquiry and teaching concerning this problem of religious commitment ... because it assumes that the most profound problems of human existence can be adequately treated when individuals "think for themselves" without intensive, continuous and instructed study ... because it promotes a miscellany of social reforms without penetrating to that depth where personality is progressively created and the course of history is determined. Consequently it cannot have the comprehensive perspective, the history-making purpose and the driving power of a saving faith.

Last to be mentioned is the most serious defect of current religious liberalism ... It is failure to recognize that freedom requires conformity at one point.²¹

Wieman's criticism of the traditional forms of liberalism, which he sees current today, leads us to ask what form of religion it is that he seeks. He asserts that he wants a **true, liberal religion**; it should stand for and essentially do everything which he claims liberalism is not doing. His liberalism is to be that of religious inquiry, seeking to experience God, seeking to understand God's will, and seeking to commit one's life to God in such a way that one's actions are in accordance with God's will. Liberal religion is not faith based on beliefs but is a faith based on actuality. Such a faith is an

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹⁹ H. N. Wieman, "Bernhardt's Analysis of Religion: Its Implications and Development," *Iliff Review*, Winter, 1954, p. 52.

²⁰ H. N. Wieman, *The Growth of Religion*, p. 248.

²¹ H. N. Wieman, *Intellectual Foundations of Faith*, pp. 201-2.

absolute faith, and only this absolute faith can meet man's needs.

Therefore the commitment of liberal religion is not to a belief but to the actuality which a belief seeks to apprehend; not to a problem solved but to a problem in process of being solved; not to an answer given but to a question asked and an answer found more or less adequate to the question . . . Such a faith is in a sense an absolute faith because it does not depend upon any fallible belief or answer. It is absolute because it is founded not on an answer but on a question of such sort that when an answer is found inadequate, another and better answer is sought . . . ²²

The liberalism Wieman seeks rejects supernaturalism and its limitations while claiming to retain the basic truths of the Christian religion. It rejects the claim that God is non-temporal and affirms that God is that temporal force working in history to save man, the same God of love who revealed his love in Jesus Christ. It rejects the claim of supernaturalism that although man is of this world he belongs to another non-temporal world, and affirms that man is made for this world in which God functions to save man. Liberalism rejects the claim that God is omnipotent and affirms that God can be and is limited by "the inertia in man himself, in social institutions and in subhuman conditions."²³ This affirmation enables liberalism to take evil seriously and to realize that God is not responsible for evil; it further takes evil seriously by placing upon man the responsibility for evil and by stressing the necessity for man to accept the responsibility to open himself to God's grace in order that salvation can occur.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 2.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

It is because Wieman's view of religion asserts that the essence of religion is to ask the question how man is saved that his scientific method is so important. Wieman contends that his method offers to man knowledge, although relative, upon which to base his faith in God. His method further serves man as a tool for correcting his knowledge and for testing his actions to see if they conform to the revealed will of God. There is another advantage of his method, over against a limitation he alleges in the method of traditional liberalism and of supernaturalism. This advantage is that his method enables religion to draw upon all the resources of science and technology and yet at the same time to remain true to the essential truth of the ancient faith. Because his method places science and religion in a mutually helpful relationship, his liberal religion is more able to help man meet his religious needs within a culture greatly under the influence of science and technology. Wieman is not saying that all men should think alike or believe what does not seem demonstrably true. What he is saying is that the task of religion, working with all other areas of human concern and knowledge, is to find and demonstrate to man the God functioning in human existence that saves and to call man to make a faith-commitment to this God, not only by words but by actions.

Liberal religion becomes positive and responsible only when it marshals all its powers to provide and equip at least some men for life-long and dedicated inquiry into the problems which concern religious faith and then endeavors to proclaim as widely and persuasively as possible what this inquiry seems demonstrably to discover.²⁴

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

Copyright and Use:

As an ATLAS user, you may print, download, or send articles for individual use according to fair use as defined by U.S. and international copyright law and as otherwise authorized under your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement.

No content may be copied or emailed to multiple sites or publicly posted without the copyright holder(s)' express written permission. Any use, decompiling, reproduction, or distribution of this journal in excess of fair use provisions may be a violation of copyright law.

This journal is made available to you through the ATLAS collection with permission from the copyright holder(s). The copyright holder for an entire issue of a journal typically is the journal owner, who also may own the copyright in each article. However, for certain articles, the author of the article may maintain the copyright in the article. Please contact the copyright holder(s) to request permission to use an article or specific work for any use not covered by the fair use provisions of the copyright laws or covered by your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement. For information regarding the copyright holder(s), please refer to the copyright information in the journal, if available, or contact ATLA to request contact information for the copyright holder(s).

About ATLAS:

The ATLA Serials (ATLAS®) collection contains electronic versions of previously published religion and theology journals reproduced with permission. The ATLAS collection is owned and managed by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) and received initial funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The design and final form of this electronic document is the property of the American Theological Library Association.