

## EDWIN SCRIBNER AMES' FUNCTIONAL RELIGION

CREIGHTON PEDEN

Let's Pretend! Let's pretend that you found yourself in a similar situation in order to see how you might act. The year is 1900 and you are returning to the University of Chicago to teach Philosophy. In a sense you are coming home, for in 1895 you were the first student to graduate from the University of Chicago with a Ph.D in Philosophy, with a dissertation entitled "The History of Agnosticism." Since then you have been teaching at Butler College, but now you are returning to join the most noted group of philosophers in the United States under the Chairmanship of none other than John Dewey. Dewey and his group of pragmatists are basically interested in restructuring society in light of their scientific approach and have little interest in or time for religion.

You are scared yet excited. All those ideas you have about the way religion is supposed to function to order to increase the fullness of life. Now is your time to teach young minds about religion. But something else is needed. It is not enough for you to try your ideas out in the classroom, so you form a fellowship of Christians with yourself as the minister. You are going to use this group as an laboratory in which to experiment with your ideas about how religion ought to function. As the years pass, you become a noted teacher, scholar and minister. Something is missing, so you decide to open a seminar which will relate to the church you have formed and rely in part upon the University for its courses. As the years pass you find yourself as Chairman of the Department of Philosophy in a major university, minister of one of the most noted churches in the city and even the country, as well as Dean of a Theological Seminary—not to mention writing a dozen or more books and dozens of articles. Your forty years as a teacher, preacher, minister and administrator are coming to a close. In the retirement address you remind them that what you have thought as a philosopher you have said as a preacher. It is said of the church which you leave that it is "so liberal that many very conservative people feel at home in it."<sup>1</sup>

Would you have been able to perform all of these ministries? Such a life does seem like pretending, but this is a sketch of the contributions of Scribner Ames, a most noted and interesting figure in the

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<sup>1</sup>"A Forty-Year Pastorate," *The Christian Century*, October 2, 1940, p. 1199.

development of American thought and particularly American religious thought. The purpose here will be to present in summary the chief contributions of Ames. Our topics will focus on his view of religion, God, Jesus, faith, and the church.

#### VIEW OF RELIGION

"Religion is the consciousness of the highest social value"<sup>2</sup>. . . "the quest for the largest and the fullest satisfaction of felt needs."<sup>3</sup>. . . "religion's task is not that of saving souls through some mysterious act of divine grace, but its task is the cultivation and nourishment of the better life through practical and effective methods."<sup>4</sup>. . . "The religious way of living is the cultivation of those things that offer satisfaction in the long run."<sup>5</sup>. . . "The definition of religion as a practical endeavor to realize values implies that it is primarily a matter of action, an affair of overt deeds."<sup>6</sup>

In an attempt to break into the world of Ames' view of religion, we have provided a few of his definitions of religion. One advantage of such an exercise is that it serves to loosen up the mind and helps us to return to the early years of the Twentieth Century. Religion, like most other aspects of life and thought, was struggling in an attempt to deal with the complex implications of evolution, cultural relativity, Marxism, the breakdown of the Newtonian world, process view of reality, historical-critical approach, and the general spirit of "How are you going to keep them down on the farm. . ." Ames is part of The Chicago School attempting to adapt Christianity in order that it will serve as a religion of the new age.

There are striking differences between the old order and the new age. In the old order reality was viewed as static, while "the doctrine of evolution has led to the view that nature is a vast process." The old presented a dualistic view of reality, dividing things into the supernatural and the natural. The new views reality monistically, so whatever is religious or spiritual is part of the natural process. The old dogma of the utter sinfulness and depravity of human nature is rejected and replaced by the conviction that it is possible to remake humankind by reconditioning and training inherent, natural impulses. There is no need for humans to rely on some supernatural force for

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<sup>2</sup>Ames, E. S. "Religious Values and the Practical Absolute," *The International Journal of Ethics*, July, 1922, p. 350.

<sup>3</sup>Ames, E. S. *Religion* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1929), p. 9.

<sup>4</sup>Ames, E. S. *Letters To God and The Devil* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1933), p. 19.

<sup>5</sup>Ames, E. S. "Liberalism Confirmed," *The Christian Century*, March 22, 1939, p. 382.

<sup>6</sup>Ames, E. S. "Religious Values and the Practical Absolute," p. 360.

<sup>7</sup>Ames, E. S. *Letters To God and The Devil*, p. 66.

salvation, for they can save themselves by creating a life committed to their highest values. "The greatest difference between the old and new world lies in the fact that the old was the creation of the uncritical judgments of naive men, through immediate sense impression and unconsciously formed customs and fancies, while the new world has been examined, measured, and tested by more reflective thought."<sup>8</sup>

Basically the new religion provides a modern attitude towards existence in striking contrast to the old dutiful sense of resignation and acceptance of natural events. Whereas religious values had been understood to have been established by revelation, it is now understood that such values are constantly being re-created in every cultural situation. Two of the chief forces creating values today are science and democracy. Science has not only destroyed classical metaphysics, but through the use of science and technology humans for the first time are in a position to deal with hunger, poverty and disease. It is the scientific method of inquiry and experimentation which is enabling us to move from accepting things as static towards a value system of striving to create reality as it can and should be. It is in the area of politics and family life that we find it most difficult for those oriented towards the old religion to apply the scientific method because it is traditional to respect the authority of established routine. What is needed is for us to apply in these areas the spirit of free inquiry in order to undertake novel social experiments for the sake of creating a more ideal social system. In essence "Christianity faces a new epoch, an epoch which requires that she identify herself completely in spirit and purpose with the highest values of modern democracy and science."<sup>9</sup>

If Christianity is able to adapt itself to the new epoch, it will demonstrate various essential traits of higher religion. The first trait will be giving emphasis to the social nature and importance of religion. Religion is social in several ways. The institutional customs demonstrate the social fabric of religion. In religion people come together to cooperate in the guidance and control of community action. Religion also provides a structure in which relationships can develop, where one can participate in the shared life of other persons. As society moves into an increasing urban and scientific world, it is essential that religion provide the social structures needed, for "religion is a social concern much in the same way as are education, business and

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<sup>8</sup>Ames, E. S. "Religious Values and Philosophical Criticism," *Essays In Honor of John Dewey*. (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1929), p. 26.

<sup>9</sup>Ames, E. S. "Religious Values and The Practical Absolute," p. 359.

law. All are experiences in which associated individuals are interdependent and reciprocally determining.”<sup>10</sup>

Another trait of religion is that its values are inclusive and give unity to all experience. Ames is careful to indicate that religious experiences are part of the natural process of every human and are not available only to those elected or blessed by some supernatural deity who allows them to break out of the natural order. It is because religious experiences are part of the simple and fundamental life-processes that science can be of any help or enlightenment to religion. What higher religion does is to provide a unity to experiences, a unity in the direction of the ideal and noble possibilities of life. Religion provides this unity by orienting humans with a “cosmic emotion.” In this emotion the individual feels himself in the presence of an order and reality which includes him but which extends beyond him. If one views the actions of various persons it may be difficult to tell which are religious, but there “is one sure mark of the difference between the religious and the non-religious man. The former is sensitized to these larger aspects of his experience. He acknowledges them and he *feels* them. But the non-religious man is less responsive to such moods, either not feeling them at all or turning from them as meaningless or misleading. He keeps himself within the immediately factual level and declines to be a poet or an artist or a participant in sentiment.”<sup>11</sup>

The result of this cosmic perspective is an additional trait which is a confidence toward reality and experience and a disciplined optimism. This confidence supports one’s conviction that humans share in their deepest selves a sense of the right and the good. Even though life’s experiences are often difficult, a disciplined optimism enables one to understand that reality, when taken in all its variety, includes a moral order. The task facing Christianity is to demonstrate how its good news relates to this confidence and disciplined optimism. When it is able to meet this task Christianity will then serve as the high religion for the new epoch which can infuse the individual with “the deep and abiding conviction that the universe is friendly at least and that any appearances to the contrary are unreal and negligible.”<sup>12</sup>

#### God

“God is love; the serving, suffering, healing love which binds men together<sup>13</sup>. . . life, actual and potential, a process, ever becoming,

<sup>10</sup>Ames, E. S. *Religion*, p. 40.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>13</sup>Ames, E. S. *The New Orthodoxy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1918), p. 50.

changing and permanent, novel and familiar<sup>14</sup>...the standard of reference for the adequacy of specific ideals<sup>15</sup>...reality manifesting the function of intelligence<sup>16</sup>...the vast order of nature, including man and human society."<sup>17</sup>

Ames' doctrine of God begins with the presupposition that the old traditional conception of supernaturalism is at best irrelevant. On the one hand he rejects this notion because it is scientifically invalid. On the other he rejects it because attributes are usually ascribed to a supernatural deity which are inappropriate to the modern world. Further, he rejects the idea because "man is reduced to a passive suppliant and to a dependent recipient of divine power."<sup>18</sup>

With reality as an infinite natural process, Ames' God is finite and limited to being the ideal spirit seeking the realization of good in the experiences of the world. As humans reach the level of "cosmic emotion" they realize that reality demonstrates a basic order of intelligence. One way of describing this intelligence in its highest manifestations is by the term "love." "God" is the conception humans project to symbolize the ideals, such as love, for which we strive. All religions are attempts to project the ideals of people in order to assist them in seeking the best in their society. Ames contends that his view is basically biblical.

The Hebrew and the Christian faiths vigorously project ideals of kingdoms of righteousness and peace among men here on earth. They employ educational, economic, and social methods of alleviation to achieve these ends. They teach that the world is at heart a moral order, and that the fulfilment of social ideals depends upon the co-operation of mankind in the service of spiritual ends. Their God is not the whole of reality as it appears in the tragic course of history, but he is identified with the will to attain the good through the dominance of order, intelligence, and love. The impulses and desires of moral ideals are evidences of the presence of God and the will of God. Because men are constantly striving for greater harmony, knowledge, and good will, they are by that very fact giving proof of the increasing realization of the divine in nature.<sup>19</sup>

It is important to Ames that God be understood as personal, al-

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<sup>14</sup>Ames, E. S. "Liberalism Confirmed," p. 382.

<sup>15</sup>Ames, E. S. *Religion*, p. 178.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 156.

<sup>17</sup>Ames, E. S. *Letters To God and The Devil*, p. 70.

<sup>18</sup>Ames, E. S. "Religious Ceremonials and Their Symbols," *The Church At Work in The Modern World*, ed. W. C. Bower (New York: Librarian Press Inc., 1967), p. 85.

<sup>19</sup>Ames, E. S. *Religion*, p. 158-159.

though he rejects the idea of the personal God as understood in the Doctrine of the Trinity. Rather, his argument on this point rests upon the empirical fact of humans being totally a part of nature. We are a part of nature in terms of our minds and personalities, as well as in our bodies. Since humans possess personality and are a part of nature, the reality which we call nature is to that extent personal. As the ideal order of nature, God is also personal. God can further be understood as personal in terms of the way we ascribe personality to groups, corporations or states.

During the earlier years of the Twentieth Century a crucial issue, related also to the problem of dualism, was whether there was evidence for the existence of God. By limiting God to the idealized reality of our personal and social experiences, Ames is presenting a functional conception of a deity. No one can empirically prove that there is an actual, objective reality corresponding to the subjective idea of God. Ames attempts to re-direct consideration away from this impossible problem by contending that "The question, Is the idea of God true? means, Is the idea of God of value in actual experience?"<sup>20</sup> He asserts that religions in all times have demonstrated the functional value of God as the unification of our highest ideals. Therefore, we should properly concern ourselves not with the problem of the existence of God but with the process of understanding God in light of the changing circumstances and experiences of the new epoch.

### JESUS

Just how does Jesus fit into this functional view of God? Ames contends that we must apply the empirical method also in determining who Jesus was and what his contribution is. This empirical approach means initially that the biblical records and the world-view it presents are to be taken critically. When we apply this method we gain an understanding that various techniques, such as miracles and unique births, were used to exalt persons and should not be taken as literal accounts. Unlike Bultmann, Ames applies his critical criteria also to the resurrection. He rejects a literal interpretation of the resurrection as "striking evidence of how much of the primitive age of child wonder and savage credulity still survive in the world."<sup>21</sup> At the same time he does see symbolic significance in the resurrection stories for they imply that the moral spirit of Jesus lives through his followers. He explains this as follows:

<sup>20</sup>Ames, E. S. "Theology from the Standpoint of Functional Psychology," *American Journal of Theology*, Vol. X, p. 229.

<sup>21</sup>Ames, E. S. *The Divinity of Christ* (Chicago: The Bethany Press, 1911), p. 25.

It seems now a pathetic fact of history that the continuance of the life of Jesus after death should have been so long and so literally associated with the idea of this bodily resurrection. The importance of his alleged ascension through physical space into the heavens has been so magnified as to withdraw attention from his real ascendancy in the moral realm. No one can doubt the fact that he came to life in this world after he died upon the cross. No argument is needed to prove that he rose from a grave of obscurity to a life of renown; from a grave of ignominy to a place of love and honor. Already, in comparison with some thirty years of ordinary life, he has lived for nineteen hundred years beyond his death! And the secret of this conspicuous fact lies not in some miraculous magic but in the moral and spiritual character. It was the power of his living words and gracious spirit that carried him over the gulfs of death and gave him immortality.<sup>22</sup>

What Ames seeks is to get away from is the Greek infested idea of Divinity and understand Jesus as the spiritual son of God. We have indicated his view that God is the unification of the ideals of love and intelligence expressed in nature. Jesus as a noble man is a revelation of these same ideals. God is more abstract while Jesus is more concrete, but together they "are the great ideal figures through which we picture ourselves."<sup>23</sup> All of us are striving in our own cultural context to fulfill our ideal selves. Jesus stands to us as a kind of pledge or promise of what we can become.

The key to Ames' view of Jesus is that as the Christ he is an imitable type for persons in all ages, and especially in the new epoch where the old world-view is no longer valid. He contends that the empirical test can be applied to Jesus in terms of the effect his spirit has had and is having upon people. As Ames views in his day the ideal of social service coming to be supreme, he concludes that the mind and will of Jesus are increasingly being reproduced and that in the distant future we may discover that society, even in politics and business, may be controlled by his spirit and move in harmony with his purposes. When this ideal of relationships occurs then Jesus will have passed the supreme empirical test establishing him as the spiritual son of God. Ames is assuming that the criteria for spiritual sonship in the old age remain valid for the new epoch. All the evidence is not in, but it seems questionable, in light of the dehumanization of technology and the state of human relationships, whether Jesus is meeting the supreme empirical test|.

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<sup>22</sup>Ames, E. S. *Religion*, p. 229-230.

<sup>23</sup>Ames, E. S. "What Is Religion?" *The Christian Century*, May 17, 1923, p. 620.

## FAITH

Immanuel Kant explained that one of his philosophical purposes was "to make room for faith." With his empirical religion, Ames is trying to make room for the Christian faith in the modern world. But it is necessary to ask what he means by "faith." In the old religion faith was a way of viewing reality which was made possible through the working of God in the form of the Holy Spirit. There was nothing essentially that a human could do to establish the condition of faith, for faith occurred by "the grace of God." Ames would agree that faith is a way of viewing reality, but it is best presented as a vital interest one has which shapes and gives direction to life. All persons have such vital interests; therefore, all share in faith. Another way of expressing the meaning of faith is to say that it is an ideal of any kind. An ideal is something desired, something that we strive after and for which we put forth effort. Ideals involve action and risk. Faith is an attitude which causes one to take risk to fulfill specific ideals. It is an attitude that ideals can be realized through the industry, intelligence and goodwill of humans working in harmony. Yet all ideals do not enable one to have religious faith, for "religious faith is differentiated from other types of faith simply by the ends or ideals which it seeks. Faith in ideals which are felt to be the highest, the most valuable, and the most essential, is religious faith."<sup>24</sup> Christian faith is living so as to bring about the ideals of love and intelligence expressed in the moral spirit of Jesus.

## CHURCH

Churches are groups of people who have banded together for the cultivation and enjoyment of the best life they can discover. These people are trying to fulfill themselves and their children the highest ideals of their society, and the church provides the structure of relating and reinforcing these ideals. Yet cultural conditions change, and with such change there must be an adjustment of ideals and ways of fulfilling the ideals. In Ames' day the church was in the transition which we have described as moving from the old world to the new epoch. But his description of the plight of religious leaders has a strikingly present ring:

Religious leaders at the present time are much concerned over the loss of dynamic and vitality in religion. Some think to secure it by more strenuous adherence to the traditional doctrines, but they do not reckon with the vast change which has come in our

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<sup>24</sup>Ames, E. S. "Religion and the Psychical Life," *International Journal of Ethics*, Vol. 20, p. 58-59.



intellectual climate, especially in the last century. There is no doubt that the loss of the traditional faith has left many people confused and rudderless, and they are finding flight from their fine ideals. They crave a sense of deeper meaning and direction for their life.<sup>25</sup>

Christianity has been characterized as a religion of salvation. In the midst of the vast changes that are confronting us, the church has to provide a salvation which is a means of individual and social regeneration, for it is only in this way that we can find "a sense of deeper meaning and direction." This individual regeneration is possible in part through more thorough and intelligent educational activities, but it must be an educational approach which presents the religious faith within a context intelligible to modern persons. We have often heard the phrase, "Getting right with God." What this means today is the Church providing a means for the individual making a satisfying adjustment to the moral universe in which we live.

The salvation to which Jesus called people involved a restructuring of the mores and traditions of society in order that a more adequate life style could be implemented. Jesus presented his social regeneration under the theme of "The Kingdom of God." "Future Shock" is upon our society and the church must provide the direction for remaking society or the salvation it offers is doomed to failure. In our foreign mission activities efforts have been undertaken to remake societies in light of the ideals of the faith, but it is also necessary for the churches to demonstrate a regenerating gospel that is relevant in our home society.

If the churches are to provide salvation in the dual sense presented by Jesus, they must provide an environment which supports individuals in seeking these highest ideals. Such an environment will demonstrate several characteristics. The first characteristic will be to "furnish a happy and sustaining fellowship for those who pursue such ideals."<sup>26</sup> Second, it will provide a fellowship that receives psychological reinforcement for these ideals through worship and prayer. Worship and prayer are means of communion with the symbolic person or with God represented by this symbol. Such communion involves the individual or group in the cosmic scope of the ideals and reinforces their commitment to fulfilling these ideals in individual and social achievements. A vital church will embody a third characteristic of cultivating free and effective thinking.

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<sup>25</sup>Ames, E. S. "Liberalism in Religion," *International Journal of Ethics*, Vol. 46, 442.

<sup>26</sup>Ames, E. S. "What Salvation Can the Church Offer Today?" *The Christian Century*, February 23, 1928, p. 235.

We have been more successful in discarding and questioning the old than we have in formulating the new. It is easy to deny miracles; it is not always easy to recognize the mysteries which remain. It is not difficult to dissent from the traditional creeds, but it is difficult to build up a satisfying philosophy of life and to hold it subject to revision without paralysis or cynicism. Yet this forward moving spirit is an essential of true religious faith. It involves more than trust in history or heroes; it requires trust in life itself.<sup>27</sup>

Without free and effective thinking the Christian religion will fail in its task of making its salvation intelligible and realizable for the new epoch. Ames views Christianity as a functional religion providing salvation to the individual and society. This salvation is not an abstract, other worldly activity, but is bound up with finding meaning and fulfillment in our present cultural context. The changes facing religion and society in Ames' day continue to be our challenges and must be confronted, if we are to be leaders of vital churches.

A vital church will continue to seek and to create more expedient and effective ways of cultivating the religious life in close cooperation with the enlarging and deepening life of society. It will enlist them in the production and use of diverse forms of art by which the heart and will may be profoundly moved to feel and act in harmony with the finest possible visions of human well being and destiny.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>Ames, E. S. "A Vital Church," *The Christian Century*, February 18, 1926, p. 219.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 221.

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