

SCIENCE SERVING FAITH: WIEMAN'S CHRISTOLOGY

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Henry Nelson Wieman is noted for the direct manner his philosophical theology addresses the issue of traditional religion versus science. By 1925, empirically oriented theology was drowning in subjectivism. Wieman, in his first book — *Religious Experience and the Scientific Method* — concentrated upon the need and possibility of developing a more objective sense of reality beyond our immediate subjective experience. He employed the scientific method as the point-of-reference for evaluating values and for developing a minimum, objective statement of God's relationship of humans and the demands of this relationship upon humans. We would make a mistake to think that Wieman joined religion and science in order to secure a more acceptable place for religion. Rather, his purpose was to direct us to the objective God and to escape from the pitfalls of pre-scientific methodology and subjective theology. The objective God is that which saves us as we can not save ourselves. As an integrating process of creativity functioning in the universe, God saves us by transforming our understanding and appreciation so as to increase qualitative meaning and value. This transformation by the creative process is described as the creative event. Wieman is trying to assert that God is both transcendent (creativity) and immanent (the creative event). Creativity is an abstraction which we infer because of the knowledge we have concerning the immanent God. The creative event is not an abstraction; it is the concrete reality in human experience which saves us. While God functions so as to save us, we have the responsibility of understanding the conditions required for the creative event. However, understanding is not enough, for we must make an absolute faith commitment to divine creativity. Wieman's focus on divine creativity includes a Christological position. We will begin with Wieman's Christology, as presented in his previously published works, and conclude with his Christological perspective presented in an unpublished manuscript "Science Serving Faith."

From his earliest writings Wieman provides some clues to his Christology. In the *Wrestle Of Religion With Truth* (1927), Jesus is compared with Buddha and Mohammed — all are vehicles through which glimpses of the goodness of the universe are seen:

In Jesus, so we Christians believe, there shines more of the unexplored and mysterious goodness of this universe, and in him there is more promise of that unimaginable blessedness that may sometime flood the world, than in

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any other. Through him we make better contact with that which lifts the value of human life to the highest level . . . But it would be a very narrow-minded Christian indeed who would say that the life of Jesus is the only quarter in which the most precious object in this universe is to be found.¹

In the passage just quoted, Wieman seems to imply that it is in Jesus' life or personality that we make better contact with that which directs our lives to the highest level. By 1930, in an article entitled "Appreciating Jesus Christ," Wieman contends that he made a mistake in supporting the orientation which sought to emphasize the personality of Jesus, because "All we can take over from Jesus Christ into our own lives must be the method, the course of procedure, the principles — if they are any such — by which he achieved the marvelous qualitative richness of his own unique personality. But we can not make the personality of Jesus our own, simply because no one personality can ever be another."² The problem is to find the principles by which Jesus lived. Wieman states that these principles can be established by following the scientific method, which will provide the conditions to be met and the specifications to be fulfilled in order to promote in our lives these highest goods. The discovery of these principles is possible because they belong to all human kind; they do "not belong to Jesus in any special way."³

In an article entitled "Was God In Jesus?," Wieman attempts in 1934 to explain the unique principles established by Jesus from the perspective of a philosophy or organism. He argues that, if we are justified in turning to Jesus for knowledge of God and for the compelling reality of God, there must be something in Jesus which can be identified as the mark of superhuman deity. This "something" is the way Jesus lived or functioned so as to demonstrate that humans are bound together in an organic unity. Wieman explains that ". . . this fact about life of Jesus is plain, namely, for him all the riches and all the fulfillment of life were to be found in this organic unity where in the good of each is the good of all and the good of all the good of each. Also the evil of each is the evil of all and the evil of all the evil of each."⁴ In demonstrating this basic functional interdependence and unity for humanity, Wieman contends that the deity came to focus in Jesus. By stressing Jesus' functional nature, we were able, based on observation and reason, to gain an understanding that the identifying mark of God is organic unity.

In 1939, Wieman wrote an article for *The Christian Century* entitled "Some Blind Spots Removed," which indicates the desire to relate his religious inquiry more closely to traditional Christian thought. He hoped to demonstrate scientifically how the essential religious insights of the Christian tradition relate to our

¹H N Wieman, *The Wrestle of Religion With Truth* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1927), p. 127

²H N Wieman, "Appreciating Jesus Christ," *The Christian Century*, October 1, 1930, p. 1181

³*Ibid.*, p. 1184

⁴H N Wieman, "Was God in Jesus?" *The Christian Century*, April 25, 1934, p. 589

contemporary understanding. As previously indicated, essential to Wieman's theology is a transforming good within each concrete situation for which we are not in any way responsible nor which we can predict or anticipate. Wieman now calls this transforming Good by the more traditional term "the Grace Of God." He contends that history tells us that there has been a growth of this transforming good, especially in inter-personal relationships. At this point, we get a substantial insight into his Christology, as he asserts that this growth and its potential is the living Christ:

This growth of connections of mutual support and enrichment, this growth of the bonds of potential meaning which fills each concrete situation with infinite fulness of value to be appreciated, is a living Christ because it issues from that historic situation in which Jesus Christ, regardless of our theological interpretation of his personality and teachings, was used by a process of history to initiate and promote such a growth.⁵

Further insight into his emerging Christology is found in Wieman's growing appreciation for the Church as a historical institution. He now asserts that this growth of good, this Living Christ in our midst, is a way of life which must be fostered by a historical community which is committed to this way of life. What makes this committed community different from every other community is that its way of life, with its hopes, ideals, and moral principles, is crucified with Christ, and must, therefore, keep a distinctive relationship with the original, historical community which formed around Christ Jesus.

The Source of Human Good in 1946 provides our major understanding of Wieman's Christology. Jesus is now presented as a catalytic agent who "started a chain reaction of creative transformation . . . simply by being the kind of person he was, combined with the social, psychological, and historical situation of the time and the heritage of Hebrew prophecy."⁶ According to Wieman there were direct consequences in the individual and collective lives of the Disciples due to the functioning of Jesus. First, there rose in the group a unique degree of mutual awareness and responsiveness so that each person was deeply and freely receptive and responsive to the others. Next, the meanings derived from each other, due to this enhanced condition of mutual awareness and responsiveness, were integrated with the meanings previously acquired:

[Each disciple] was transformed, lifted to a higher level of human fulfilment. Each became more of a mind and person, with more capacity to understand, to appreciate, to act with power and insights; for this is the way human personality is generated and magnified and life rendered more nobly human.⁷

⁵H.N. Wieman, "Some Blind Spots Removed," *The Christian Century*, 1939, p. 117.

⁶H.N. Wieman, *The Source of Human Good* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1964), p. 40.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 40.

A third consequence follows the first two. Since they were more sensitive to and appreciative of the world as seen from the perspective of others, their personal and collective reality was richer in terms of meaning and quality. Due to their enlarged capacity to gain the perspectives of those they encountered, there developed an expanded depth and breath of community among themselves and all people. Thus, the result of Jesus' functioning as a "catalytic agent" was that the Disciples found themselves living in a community miraculously deeper and wider than had previously existed. Wieman is careful to point out that this power leading to creative transformation was not in the man Jesus. Rather, Jesus was in or a part of this power — a power that we can understand in part as emerging in a cultural context. This creative power occurred in the interaction between these individuals in such a way that their minds, personalities, appreciable world and community were transformed:

What happened in the group about Jesus was a lifting of this creative event to dominate their lives. What happened after the death of Jesus was a release of this creative power from constraints and limitations previously confining it; also the formation of the fellowship with an organization, ritual, symbols, and documents by which this dominance of the creative event over human concern might be perpetuated through history. Of course, there was little if any intellectual understanding of it; but intellectual understanding was not required to live under its control in the culture then and there prevailing, for men did not have our technology.⁸

Wieman also addresses the issue of whether the teachings of Jesus should be considered of pre-eminent importance. If the teachings are considered in isolation, Jesus becomes only another wise person. Rather, the teachings must be considered part of revelation, defining revelation as the complex transforming event that occurred between the Disciples. The power is derived from the events and not from the teachings. Wieman explains that "the teaching may well be a necessary part of the total occurrence. But events rich in value and events transformative of human existence run deeper than ideas and doctrines and are mightier."⁹

Jesus as the Christ or as the transforming agent is not limited to the group of Disciples but provides world-transforming efficacy. What Christ has done can be simply stated: "the reversing of the order of domination in the life of man *from* domination of human concern by created goods *over to* domination by creative good."¹⁰ This event provides salvation by continuing to be efficacious in a fellowship made continuous in history. God is incarnate in these creative transforming events, revealing God's forgiveness of sin and assurance of saving the world.

⁸Ibid., p. 41. cf. H.N. Wieman, "What Is Most Important in Christianity?" in Cedric L. Hepler, ed., *Seeking A Faith For A New Age, Essays on the Interdependence of Religion, Science and Philosophy* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press 1975.)

⁹Ibid., p. 217.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 269.

Wieman attempts to explain his Christology in terms of the ancient Christian doctrine of God's revelation, forgiveness of sin and salvation expressed by way of Jesus Christ.

In *Science Serving Faith*, Wieman continues his general theological position premised on the contention that God is divine creativity operative in human existence. This divine creativity functions so as to sustain, save and transform us towards the greater good. The problem is that "this divine creativity is latent and ignored, generally, until it is revealed by rising to a level of dominance over all that overlays and opposes it in human life."¹¹ This rise to dominance is described as a transformation called the saving event, creating an ever deeper appreciative understanding of the unique individuality of others. Whenever this transformation occurs, it is the revelation of God. What the *New Testament* essentially records is the experience the Disciples had with or because of Jesus. This was a transforming experience which revealed Jesus to be Christ. It is not the man Jesus, his teachings or his resurrection which are important. Wieman rejects the controversy over whether the reanimated body of Jesus moved and spoke, contending that the only important point was that the saving power of the creative transformation continued with them after Jesus was gone.¹² While the revelation of God in Christ is not the only example of this divine creativity at work, Wieman sees it as historically significant due to the chain of creative events which have flowed from it:

This event initiated a sequence of events in history which changed the order of society in certain ways, redirected the course of history and, when required conditions are present, continues to bring about a reorganization of the personality of individuals so that interpersonal conflicts cease to be disruptive, interpersonal conflicts cease to be destructive, and social conflicts can be resolved in ways beneficial to the parties concerned.¹³

In this manuscript Wieman stresses the need for modern cultures, with their fantastic technological powers, to be guided by divine creativity. This is only possible if we search out and provide the conditions most favorable for creative interchange to occur. It has been possible previously to look to the Christian tradition for the required conditions. Wieman explains what conditions we can learn from the Christian religion:

One of these conditions is that the individual comes into vital association with the fellowship in which this transforming event takes place. Another

¹¹H N Wieman, "Science Serving Faith," unpublished manuscript (Archives Southern Illinois University Library at Carbondale), Chapter One, p 16 In the process of editing this manuscript for publication, Creighton Peden, with permission of Mrs H N Wieman, has changed all "sexist language"

¹²Cf H N Wieman, "Reply to Horton," *The Empirical Theology of Henry Nelson Wieman*, ed Robert W Bretall (New York Macmillan Co, 1963), pp 190-3, and *Ibid*, "Reply to Weigel," pp 354-377

¹³H N Wieman, "Science Serving Faith," Chapter One, p 8

condition is that the individual recognize the need to be transformed. This is called confession and repentance of sin. A further condition is that the individual accept as the ruling concern the life-giving interchange in Christ which delivers from fragmentary and self-destructive forms of existence.¹⁴

While these conditions are universally acknowledged in the Christian religion, our secular-scientific cultures require more accurate specifications of these conditions in order that intelligent action can be applied to meet them. This specification requires the employment of the scientific method. While Christ is the actual operative presence working to transform us from the corruption of evil and toward the greater good, it is science which can provide the descriptive understanding about the required conditions. This does not mean that the Christ event can be reduced to a set of scientifically described structures, but it does mean that "science can provide descriptive accuracy sufficient to guide intelligent action in serving Christ and in recognizing this event beneath the symbols we use about it."¹⁵ However, it is necessary to understand that the knowledge of the conditions provided by science will not itself enable the power of Christ to change human lives. One must be committed to creating the conditions, but one is only able to make this commitment because of some experience of the transforming power of divine creativity — of Christ. Wieman notes that this conforms to Christian understanding "when it is asserted that commitment of the individual to Christ is a gift of God's grace."¹⁶

In all his writings, Wieman turns to the social sciences, especially psychology, to provide the best information for understanding the conditions supportive of the creative event. A most interesting contribution in this work is his discussion of how Erik Erikson illustrates the kind of knowledge that can be scientifically gained. Wieman contends that this emphasis on a commitment to what sustains and develops wholeness of being compares to Erikson's idea of successful identity formation. All persons go through a series of crises. While traditional Christianity speaks to the crises, the complicated conditions of modern living, dominated by science and technology are exercising enormous power over the conditions of human existence. So long as Christianity fails to employ the insights afforded by the sciences, it will not ordinarily be helpful in dealing with these crises. It is at this point that the research-science of Erikson becomes significant.

The first crises presented by Erikson is "trust vs. mistrust." It is essential that the infant develop adequate trust, especially in relation to the mother. For this trust to develop in the infant, the other must be sustained by a deep-laid organization of personality, reaching far beyond her conscious purpose and good intentions. The mother is able to generate this trust in the child because of her experiences which have generated this trust in her. Wieman asserts that "what sustains the trust of the

¹⁴*Ibid.*, Chapter Three, pp. 2-3.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, Chapter Four, p. 18.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, Chapter Three, p. 5.

infant is God in Christ when this expression refers to that kind of interchange continuing through history which creates mutual trust and profound concern between individuals when required conditions are present.”¹⁷ When we speak of this basic trust later in life, we refer to the religious concept of “faith.”

The second crisis that Wieman attributes to Erikson is “autonomy vs. shame, doubt.” All children have experiences which lead them to a condition of shame and doubt about their self-worth, resulting in the pretense to be something other than their true selves or the attempt to hide and sink into oblivion. Wieman contends that the solution to this crisis is to be found in the resources God revealed in Christ, “because the sense of autonomy, independence, self-confidence, and self-worth will develop to the measure that the interchange between the small child and one’s parents is the kind creating recognition and appreciation for one another of the genuine individuality of each.”¹⁸

The concept “initiative vs. guilt” designates the third crisis. According to Erikson that best way to deal with guilt is to promote identity formation. Wieman explains his version of Erikson’s insight by saying that guilt needs to be focused so as to promote wholeness of being and the commitment of faith:

This way of treating guilt requires two things. It requires first that one acknowledge one’s self for what one truly is with whatsoever guilt and virtue are in one. Only when one does this can one meet the second requirement, that is, to commit one’s self as one truly is, guilt and all to the divine creativity of interchange able to weave this guilty self into the fabric of life to create a goodness not otherwise possible. Thus does the self, guilt and all, become something precious.¹⁹

While Wieman discusses the other crises, these three serve to illustrate his intention that Erikson, although focusing on the problem of health, is essentially dealing with religious issues. However, there is a basic difference when the focus is on health instead of religion. For a health problem one only needs to commit to the regime and treatment required. But development of the person into the wholeness of being requires a commitment in faith to divine creativity.

Wieman believes that the Christian religion, employing scientific research, can speak to the crisis of the modern world, as illustrated in the discussion of Erikson’s work. He proposes seven ways that the Christian religion must function if it is to bring the salvation of Christ to modern persons, i.e., “when Christ means what carries people most successfully through the major crisis of human life to the end of our salvation.”²⁰ This sevenfold approach is designated as cognitive, educational, evangelical, institutional, cultural, historical, and philosophical-

¹⁷*Ibid.*, Chapter Seven, p. 29.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, Chapter Seven, p. 30.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, Chapter Seven, p. 31.

²⁰*Ibid.*, Chapter Seven, p. 38.

theological. In the cognitive emphasis, the Christian religion is responsible for developing the best possible intellectual understanding of what is called for in the commitment of faith. Education is required which will enable the individual in society to be sustained through the crisis of formation. The evangelical conduct required of Christians in the modern world is to live so as “to respond with appreciative understanding to the unique individuality of the other person.”²¹ The institutions supported by Christians must be re-shaped so as to help as we undergo the crisis of personal development. The Christian religion must also develop a cultural perspective which will include an understanding of the significance of science so we can integrate science into our comprehensive view of the way life should be lived. The historical and philosophical-theological responsibilities are a part of the effort to broaden our perspectives in order to better understand human experiences and to develop an adequate ideology for guiding our decisions in this scientific age.

To say the least, Henry Wieman’s Christology is non-traditional. The significance of Jesus the man is rejected, because the revelation of Christ is manifest in a transforming event that occurs between Jesus and his disciples. While Jesus is the central character or catalytic agent in this event, Jesus can be designated as Jesus Christ only because of being in relation to the saving event. Jesus’ significance is also limited since this saving event occurs throughout human history, often in times and cultures unrelated to the tradition of Jesus as the Christ. However, the life of Jesus is important for the principles it provides, when these principles are understood to demonstrate that humans are bound together in organic unity. Thus, Jesus is significant as a catalytic agent sparking the Christ event and for demonstrating human relatedness.

In traditional theology God was incarnate in Jesus Christ from birth to death and beyond death through the resurrection. While he does not even mention Jesus’ birth, Wieman rejects as insignificant the issue of the resurrection. Whether some partially decomposed body rose from the dead and continued to spark the Christ event is unimportant. The significant factor is that the Christ event continued to occur between the Disciples, demonstrating that divine creativity continues to function to transform humans in relationships. This *is* the resurrection. By intent or omission Wieman appears to be presenting a modern modified adoptionist theory of the incarnation. In his life Jesus demonstrates important insights about human nature, but Jesus becomes the Christ when he is able to spark the transforming event. The Christ appears only when divine creativity becomes incarnate by adopting, using and manifesting itself as an operative presence in a particular person. When a person is “adopted,” the individual becomes a catalytic agent — one among many — sparking the appearance of the living Christ transforming humans and their relationships. Since Jesus is only actualized as the Christ, the transforming event with the Disciples, it is questionable whether Jesus is the Christ apart from this saving event.

²¹*Ibid.*, Chapter Seven, p. 40.

While the trinitarian tradition differentiated between God incarnate in Jesus Christ and God in the form of the Holy Spirit, Wieman chooses not to make this distinction. God is the process of divine creativity which functions so as to save humans through transforming events. When divine creativity manifests itself in Jesus, or anyone else, so as to spark the saving event, the living Christ or Christ event occurs. The Holy Spirit traditionally is presented as the way God functions so as to enable individuals to respond to salvation or the transformation God offers. Wieman appears to use "the name of Christ or Holy Spirit (in relation) to this creativity which creates and expands the appreciative consciousness."²²

A distinguishing feature of Wieman's theology and Christology is his employing insights from modern social sciences instead of relying on contemporary and historical theology and biblical studies. Wieman contends that a more adequate understanding of the Christ event can be gained through the work of social scientists like Erik Erikson. In essence, Wieman points out that the purpose of the Christian religion is to assist people, in a given social and historical context, to understand and to commit to that which creates, sustains, saves and transforms towards the best that human life can ever attain. Since its inception Christianity has made significant adjustments in the sevenfold manner of relating to the changing cultural context. The adjustment of Augustine to Neo-Platonic philosophy and Aquinas to Aristotelian philosophy are but two examples of major cultural adjustments in the Christian religion. But today the social-historical condition has changed radically and quickly due to the scientific revolution, with its new view of reality and the tremendous power available with this revolution. The old understanding of Christ held over from previous times is not fitted to guide the commitment of faith for many modern persons. What is required is a re-shaped Christology based on an intellectual understanding afforded by science. Only when science is put to the service of the Christian religion can the revelation of God in Christ be made intelligible so that we can understand this revelation and commit ourselves in faith to divine creativity.

²²H.N. Wieman, "Empiricism in Religious Philosophy," in Cedric L. Hepler, ed., *Seeking a Faith for a New Age, Essays on the Interdependence of Religion, Science and Philosophy*, p. 153. Cf. Marvin C. Shaw, "Naturalism and the Christ: Wieman's Christology," *Encounter*, Vol. 42, No. 4, p. 391, for a discussion of Wieman's Christology being a "unitarian of the third person."

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