

MELAND'S PHILOSOPHICAL METHOD – PART TWO

W. CREIGHTON PEDEN

III. FAITH AND CULTURE

At this point it is necessary to attend to another aspect of Meland's method, namely the emphasis given to *the relationship of faith and culture*. The root principle of Meland's method of empirical realism is that the immediacies of experience are the bearers of a depth of reality to which response and interpretation must be given.¹⁹ This principle asserts the notion that all human existence takes place within a particularized orbit of meaning. The cultural history of a particular people is the determining factor for the establishment of an orbit of meaning. Granting that interchange does occur with alien and rival cultures, Meland asserts that the initial and primordial drives within a particular culture achieve reflection, to generate a characteristic disposition of mind, or in other words, a persistent thrust of the psyche. On the basis of this analysis, the human response is limited in two ways: (1) the creaturely limitations which apply to all men; and (2) the limitations derived from the cultural orbit of meaning.

Because of this orbit of meaning, every people tends to employ the terms of their culture as the only terms expressive of universal meaning. This tendency has been especially true in the area of religious witness. Because of this tendency, it is necessary now to consider the problem of myth, as indicated in the prolegomena.

For Meland, contemporary theology rests precariously upon a re-possession and reconception of myth. Such an assertion raises *the question of myth*, biblical and contemporary, *and its relation to reason*. The relation of myth and reason has become important under the influence of those who would demythologize the New Testament. In view of Meland's understanding of man as tied to the mythos, the issue boils down to the question how reason is to be employed in our reaching out or encountering ultimate dimensions of reality.

The answer to this question will be found in the method used, but it is predetermined by one's understanding of the nature and function of reason. If one has a view which asserts that reason is a faculty which is or can be separate from the body in its access to ultimate reality, then

W. CREIGHTON PEDEN is Callaway Professor of Philosophy at Augusta College, Augusta, Georgia. This is the second part of Dr. Peden's essay, the first part having been published in the previous issue of *The Iliff Review*.

¹⁹Cf., B. E. Meland, *The Realities of Faith*, p. 116, 170.

one's answer will be different from the process view which sees reason as the total functioning of the organism engaged in thought and inquiry.

Reason is not one thing among other things, one faculty or organ among others; rather it is the total organism acting in a specific way under certain conditions; that is, with a specific focus, following from being attentive to something, in response to something, or intent upon something. Reason is the human organism when it is luminous with thought and inquiry. And the human organism is that kind of structure that can fluctuate between a highly attentive state in which, as we say, reason is alert and active, to a near indolent state in which consciousness appears barely to exist. But one is not to assume that reason is active only in this highly attentive state of the organism; for to the degree that selected impressions have been reflected upon, assimilated and judged, they tend to be stored away, as it were, kept dormant, but ready to be activated internally as a memory recalled, or as an internal stimulus to further reflection. Thus, what appears to be indolence is often either reverie or a vibrant internalizing of thought, sustained by this inner stimulus of recall and its reflective response.²⁰

To understand Meland's evaluation of reason, it is necessary to remember his view of the creaturely limitations of man. Man holds a high position in the growth of natural structures, but his structure is not definitive of reality beyond his level of emergence. There seems as little reason to assume that man's organic structure is indicative of what is ultimate in reality. In view of these limitations of the human structure, the use of human pictures or analogies in relation to what is ultimate in reality must be considered. Man uses such pictures or analogies in myths because they are forms with which he is most clearly associated. Such a use is natural in man's attempt to point to reality which transcends his own creaturely limitations. This mythical response is legitimate when it is used as a way of expressing praise, wonder, apprehension, gratitude, or anxiety about that mystery which confronts us in existence. The problem occurs when these metaphorical images are taken literally. When this occurs, it is asserted that mythological language presumes to describe, define, or characterize reality in literal or logical terms. Such a use of myth is illegitimate within the context of its original purpose. Especially this use of myth is illegit-

²⁰B. E. Meland, "Some Directives for Theological Method," unpublished, pp. 10-11.

imate for the purpose of religion and theology.²¹ What actually happens is that the mythological structure confined to logical and literal terms is destroyed and a new myth is created. Such a procedure for considering myths is very dangerous because it tends to preclude the possibility of a more sensitive encounter with realities to which man is trying to extend himself, since man's sensitivity becomes bound within these literal terms.

Meland is aware that this illegitimate use of myth can occur within the process position, and he accuses Schubert Ogden of this false use.²² For Ogden, the results of scientific research change, but the fundamental method of science and the picture of the world correlative with it remain constant. Taking this position Ogden holds the process imagery to be definitive of this constant picture of the world. Meland asserts that Ogden needs to be more definitive and discriminating within scientific imagery. It is Meland's contention that the world-picture formed by modern natural science is in a process of development; therefore, Meland rejects the use of process imagery as the definitive imagery. This illegitimate use of myth occurs when the framework of process is presented as being normative of reality. In this false situation it is asserted that the process position, to a great degree, amounts to specifying the structure of reality. Meland rejects this normative process view.

... I would hold that the framework and what issues from it in the way of a model is clearly a human formulation having the value only of a venture in intelligibility. The truth is not given by the framework. The truth is a truth of actuality (revelation), received from the witness of faith, or out of the depths of experience.²³

IV. INTELLIGIBILITY

It is important that we give consideration to what Meland means by "intelligibility." *The question of intelligibility* raises the question whether the myth is true.

I should answer that, in the sense in which this question is generally raised, the question is not really relevant. . . Actuality asks no rational conformation. It does not wait for the intellect to settle its problems. It literally creates and cradles the mind that questions it . . . The truth aspect of anything depends upon the degree to which it can be made to accommodate itself to the intel-

²¹Cf., B. E. Meland, *Faith and Culture*, pp. 80-95.

²²Cf., B. E. Meland, "Analogy and Myth in Post-Liberal Theology," unpublished, pp. 19-27.

²³B. E. Meland, "Some Directives for Theological Method," unpublished, p. 14.

lect . . . But it also follows that the abstract procedure, by which truth is sought, tends to construct a fabric of meaning which may have only an incidental relation to actuality. . .

Truth as applied to myth or the structure of experience can have only the force of intelligibility. That they exist and what they convey, can be made consistent with a given structure of thought resting upon intelligible categories. Perhaps they can have one more kind of truth: a practical, junctional truth—namely, that what they portray of man illumines experience and provides conditions in the sense of an orientation of the human psyche which actually redeems man.²⁴

Intelligibility does not mean the complete assimilation of the truth of reality; rather, it is a momentary recognition of the depth of reality revealed in the experience. In other words intelligibility is a vision that comes to the mind which serves to illumine the context in which this mystery occurs, enabling man to receive and respond to its occurrence. Thus, this form of thought is instrumental in enabling man to make a mythical response to this depth of reality which is beyond our human structure but confronts us within our own limitations. In effect, Meland is shifting the issue here from the question of faith and reason to the broader issue of the mythical response expressed through the act of faith. Under the dominance of Idealism, faith came to be considered as a subjective response or inner experience which could not stand up to the tests of reason. Meland is attempting to break with this subjective connotation of faith by associating the act of faith with the mythical response. In such an association, he is attesting to a total response by man to this depth of reality. He accepts that this depth of reality is initially unavailable to conscious scrutiny, but at the same time this mythical reality does encounter man as he lives. It was pointed out in our earlier statement of his method that the act of faith is the foundation upon which reason can be used properly in the theological inquiry. This same point is made in his consideration of faith as mythical response, and in his contention that reason must be kept in creative tension with faith.

Faith as mythical response is more elemental than reason, not in the sense merely that it is less critical, less sophisticated; but in the sense that it is more basic in its integration with this depth of reality, more innocently responsive to what is unmanageable and commanding in the exigencies of existence. Reason offers each individual freedom, independence and an assertiveness expressive

²⁴B. E. Meland, *Faith and Culture*, p. 113-4.

of our individuated existence. Left to itself it can be divisive and alienating; but when it is responsive and integrative with faith, it can be illuminating. It can be emancipating without dissipating this elemental response to the depth of experience.²⁵

V. RELATIONSHIP OF PHILOSOPHY TO METHOD

At this point we turn to the question how this standard of intelligibility is developed within the context of Meland's method of creative tension between faith and reason. More appropriately the question is how the theologian is to employ *philosophy* in pursuing his *theological inquiry*.

Constructive theology, in so far as it pursues a formulation of the cognitive meanings of the Christian faith in the context of structural meanings that provide intelligibility in our time, has no alternative but to follow the procedure that has given rise to systematic theology in former periods of reconstruction—namely, of setting the sentiments of the Christian myth in the philosophical context that elaborates the controlling idea. . .

One can say that the procedure of interpreting the Christian faith in terms of a controlling concept in any given age is simply the act of integrating the imagery of the faith with the intelligible discourse of the age. It is the way by which the sentiments of faith take on cognitive force and become relevant qualifications to human thought and action.²⁶

Meland readily admits that in the act of theologizing it is difficult to reduce one's disciplined efforts to a simple ideology or to a particular school of thought. For better or worse, the theologian makes a response based on the person he is due to his process of becoming.

I have steadily come to the view that one's philosophical orientation is not so much a system of ideas as a structure of meaning in which one's experiences occur and take on intelligibility.²⁷

The theologian will have disciplined himself within a particular frame of reference, but there will be also a subtle blending of many other factors. An example of one of these factors is the type of educational system in which the theologian has been trained. If one has been trained as a British theologian, one probably has been influenced by a

²⁵B. E. Meland, "Some Directives for Theological Method," unpublished, pp. 15-16.

²⁶B. E. Meland, *The Reawaking of Christian Faith*, New York: Macmillan, 1949, p. 89-90.

²⁷B. E. Meland, "Interpreting the Christian Faith Within a Philosophical Framework," *Journal of Religion*, Vol. 33, p. 88.

specialization system of education. If one is an American theologian, the chances are strong that one will have been influenced greatly by the pragmatic system developed by John Dewey. The theologian, or any one else for that matter, can never take into account all the subtle influences which determine his process of theologizing, but he should attempt to become as self-conscious as possible, to the degree that he can at least state his basic presuppositions.

Here Meland is attempting to find a middle road between the traditional kerygmatic theologian and the metaphysical or ontological theologian. He desires to go beyond the kerygmatic theologian in affirming some degree of conscious effort on the part of the theologian in bringing intelligibility to theological statements. At the same time he wants to do this in such a way that his theology does not fall into the pattern of Tillich's, Bultmann's or Odgen's of translating mythical statements of faith into ontological propositions. It is not Meland's intention to set the Christian faith in a static categorical scheme of process philosophy. Granted that he speaks from a metaphysical process position, Meland wants to employ suggestive notions from a process imagery in order to show that a mythical expression of this depth of reality can be understandable as a meaningful way of speaking to modern man. In other words, he wants to develop a margin of intelligibility for theological statements without binding this witness of faith within a philosophical frame of reference. Thus, the philosophical imagery is used to give insights into the witness of faith as expressed theology, without reducing either the witness of faith or the theology to the limits of the philosophical system.

It is rather setting the outreach of faith in an intelligible context such that the language of faith, its hopes and aspirations, become continuous with the reasonable discourse of the culture. This is to render the faith intelligible and relevant to the living culture by bringing it fruitfully into accord with the sensible experiences of the age, out of which the intelligible response, informing life and conduct, emerge.²⁸

The theologian must understand how his own philosophical thinking is shaped by a particular philosophical system, in order that the making of theological statements is not limited by the philosophical system. The philosophical system affords one an imagery which may be of value in gaining intelligible insights into the meaning of the act of faith. Meland is placing specific limitations upon the role of philosophy in theology. Philosophy is a sharp attempt to look at reality

²⁸B. E. Meland, *The Reawakening of Christian Faith*, p. 71.

from a disciplined perspective; but philosophy can give a distorted view of reality, if it does not take account of the historical limitations of man. Without taking into consideration these limitations, one could come to consider that reality is actually envisioned within the disciplined view presented by philosophy. Process philosophy, under the influence of Whitehead, has attempted consistently in most cases to take into account the distance between its basic imagery and reality-as-such. It has done this by asserting that its basic notions are metaphors and not complete descriptions of reality. At the same time, Meland realizes that the process philosopher or theologian, like any other thinker, can assert the limitations of his position but become so involved in his thought-patterns that he begins to develop his position as if his frame of reference is normative of reality. This tendency Meland strongly rejects and asserts that reason as a vision of the mind must be employed always tentatively and experimentally as an attempt to gain intelligible insights into the depth of reality experienced within the limits of the human structure. This degree of intelligibility can never become normative but is at best a hypothesis or a venture of hope.

In Meland's method the theologian and philosopher operate from different perspectives or, in other words, theological speaking is different from philosophical speaking. Pointing to the difference between theological and philosophical speaking is but another way of asserting the difference between faith and reason. Their speaking is similar in that it is a human form of expression and, therefore, is subject to human limitations; yet, their speaking differs because the focus of their speaking differs. The focus of the philosopher is the world of meaning which can arise from a particular perspective of conscious awareness. His speaking about this world of meaning follows the rules of an accepted logic. In part the focus of the theologian is a similar perspective of conscious awareness, but he must attend also to the intimations of an ultimate reality included in the experience. These intimations come as the revelation of judgment and grace in the experience, but this revelation exceeds his conceptual reach. The focus of the theologian is broader than the focus of the philosopher; he attends to the scope of conscious awareness but also attends to an unmanageable depth of existence within the experience in which the judgment and grace of God is revealed, even though this revelation exceeds his conceptual reach. Because of this depth, the theologian initially cannot use the language of philosophy or critical analysis, but must use more indirect forms of expression, myth forms.

The imagery of philosophy then can be employed for the purpose

of gaining insight for the contemporary mind into the myth forms, but the philosophical terms are transformed in response to the demands that are placed upon them by the scope of theological inquiry.

Because the new metaphysics, giving to scientific categories their full and imaginative meaning, rises out of the living experiences of men in which decisions are made and where events of tragedy and triumph are forged, it finds an immediate rapport with the imagery and poetic symbolism of the biblical writers. What this ancient lore sets forth through parable and poetry the metaphysician, attuned to the qualitative meaning of every concrete event, finds himself expounding in what he understands to be more definitive terms. The interrelating of these ancient and modern sources forms a continual dialogue in one's reflections.²⁹

Meland's method is oriented as an attempt to develop a theological inquiry that will speak to contemporary man. He sees modern man conveying a form of sophistication which asserts that man is superior to the elemental stance of man as creature. This sophistication of modernity is conveyed under the pose of human self-sufficiency. Modern man seems to be asking for a theological or ontological formula that will enable his sophisticated mind to participate, at least intellectually, within the context of the Christian faith. Meland does not share this high assumption of the status of contemporary intellectual powers nor of the ultimate potency of contemporary imagery, and, thus, he rejects the theological formula which modern man requests. A reliance upon the intellectual formulation of meaning is no alternative for modern man's encountering the realities of faith. Meland's method is the reverse of demythologizing. He wants to begin with the degree of elementalism which is offered in the human situation coming out of the historical situation, to take seriously the depth and complexity of this situation, and in so doing to open himself to the intimations of judgment and grace which are revealed to him. The critical procedure will follow from this act of faith expressed in myth form, but it will be employed under the transforming influence of the faith-act.

Meland's method of empirical realism begins with the act of faith, which serves as the foundation for the witness to faith, or in other words, the mythical response. This elemental encounter transforms the total organism of man in such a way that his total response, including his reason, is re-created and re-directed. There thus develops a crea-

²⁹B. E. Meland, "Interpreting the Christian Faith Within a Philosophical Framework," *Journal of Religion*, Vol. 33, p. 91.

tive tension between the Act of faith and the critical process. When this creative tension is narrowed down to specific concerns, a creative tension becomes necessary between these concerns. This creative tension is expressed as a tension between the following concerns: (1) the individual and community; (2) the cultus and the culture; (3) the Bible as the primal source of ultimate valuation and the contemporary forms of witness to this depth; (4) the sacramental and ceremonial witness to the living Christ by the church and the individual's experience and response to the judgment and grace of God in his existence; (5) conceptual or symbolic level of witness to the living Christ and a concrete level of participation in the energies of grace and judgment, or the traditional witness to the Christ-event and a concrete awareness of this Event as a continuing revelation of judgment and grace; (6) the traditional Judaic-Christian mythos and contemporary expressions of the mythos; (7) faith and culture; and (8) form and realities. It becomes obvious that although Meland's method begins with the act of faith it definitely includes a dialectical process, a dialectical process between faith and the critical process and, in more specific concerns, dialectical processes between those concerns just listed. In general, Meland asserts three witnessing vortices to the Christian faith, bodying forth the living Christ. The first is the witness of the Church, including the Bible as the primal source of this witness.³⁰ The culture is the second center of witness, in so far as it retains the formative influence of the mythos within its orbit of meaning. And finally, the individual's experience of judgment and grace, in so far as it includes a distinctive witness of response and decision.

VI. SUMMARY

In summary, it can be said that Meland's method moves in a faith-circle. It presupposes the act of faith. Theology then makes critical responses to three forms of Christian witness, just outlined, with the contemporary scene. This critical process consists of attending to these vortices of witness in the light of all available insights concerning man's elemental response to what is ultimate in existence. The theologian must make an evaluation whether this faith is available to all within the culture who receive this witness as pointing to a depth of judgment and grace or is limited to those only who stand within the "community of the faithful." Such an evaluation presupposes the critical response of the dialectical processes, pointed to before. Meland's own theological position has moved in the direction of affirming the faith-witness

³⁰cf., B. E. Meland, "Modern Protestantism: Aimless or Resurgent?," *The Christian Century*, Dec. 4, 1963, pp. 1494-97; "Toward a Common Faith," *Christendom*, 1937, p. 397.

as open to all within the culture who share in a decisive way the experience of judgment and grace. The problem then presents itself of making the faith witness intelligible to modern man. Meland insists that the meaning of this witness be kept in the contextual, nurturing matrix which has kept it alive and efficacious through many centuries. This affirmation points to the importance of the total matrix of history to the present.³¹ At the same time, Meland asserts the necessity of using contemporary imagery to gain insight into the Judaic-Christian mythos. He feels that contemporary "process" imagery, with its relational mode of thinking and its emphasis on the depth of experience, can be employed in gaining insight into such traditional notions as "covenant,"³² "Suffering Servant,"³³ "judgment" and "grace,"³⁴ "sin,"³⁵ "redemption,"³⁶ "eschatology,"³⁷ and "revelation."³⁸ This use of process imagery is of value because it also aids the contemporary mind to repossess the notion of myth as a legitimate human response to what is ultimate in the immediacies of existence. Having repossessed the value of myth, the theologian then is in a position to direct men to the primal source of witness, the Bible. At this point one is confronted by the options of demythologizing the primal witness or of retaining the mythos and trying to develop a margin of intelligibility between the limitations of one's contemporary circumstances and this primal witness within its limitations. Having repossessed the value of myth for contemporary understandings of the mythos. Thus, Meland's method of empirical realism returns again to the act of faith with its critical response to the three witnesses of faith in his attempt to fulfill the demand for intelligibility in the Christian faith.

Meland's method begins with the Protestant appeal to faith. He points out that this emphasis on salvation by grace shows the influence of his Lutheran background. His Presbyterian influence can be seen in his emphasis upon the importance of the church and the Bible as our primal source of witness. Although Meland stands within this rich

³¹Cf., B. E. Meland, "The New Realism in Religious Inquiry," unpublished, p. 5ff.

³²Cf., B. E. Meland, *The Realities of Faith*, p. 46, 135, 228.

³³Cf., *ibid.*, p. 80, 170, 181ff., 262ff., 279; B. E. Meland, *Seeds of Redemption*, New York: Macmillan, 1947, p. 110ff.

³⁴Cf., B. E. Meland, *Faith and Culture*, p. 177-80; *Seeds of Redemption*, New York: Macmillan, 1947, p. 110ff.

³⁵Cf., B. E. Meland, *Faith and Culture*, p. 70, 139, 146-51; *Seeds of Redemption*, p. 79-80, 148.

³⁶Cf., B. E. Meland, *Faith and Culture*, p. 157, 176, 180, 184-9; *The Realities of Faith*, p. 48ff, 227ff, 269.

³⁷Cf. B. E. Meland, "Response of Bernard E. Meland to Papers Presented by Perry LeFevre, Kenneth B. Marshall, and P. E. Lichtenstein," unpublished, p. 8; B. E. Meland, "The Changing Role of Reason and Revelation in Western Thought," unpublished, p. 15; *The Realities of Faith*, p. 95ff.

³⁸Cf., B. E. Meland, *The Realities of Faith*, p. 170-84, 254ff., 290ff., 342, 248ff.; *Faith and Culture*, p. 86, 136-8, 196-7.

source of Protestant tradition, he offers two corrective insights into the way in which this original Protestant appeal has developed under the influence of a rising scientific orientation. One insight is to counteract the individualism which has developed the Protestant appeal to faith by asserting, on the one hand, the necessity of the individual being related constructively to the community of the faithful and on the other hand, of the individual being related constructively to culture. The other insight comes in his emphasis upon faith, but faith always in creative tension with reason. Thus, Meland's method of empirical realism can be said to be based on the Protestant appeal to faith, expanding this understanding to a creative tension between faith and reason.

In the working out of the theological task we shall have to go beyond the historical Protestant understanding of the interrelation of faith and reason, treating this concern, not simply as a problem of religious knowledge, but as a problem of relating affection to the act of knowing such that awareness of the source of human value may issue in faith and commitment to the sovereign God and thus a saving knowledge.³⁹

³⁹B. E. Meland, "Faith and Critical Thought," *The Personalist*, Vol. XXXIV, p. 150.

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.