

B. E. MELAND'S PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

Creighton Peden

Bernard Eugene Meland is one of the most noted American theologians, especially within the process tradition.¹ His philosophy of religion can be viewed from the following perspectives: religion as the pathway to healthy living; religion as a pathway for the development of a healthy and spiritual culture; religion as the pathway to salvation; religion as the problem of the individual in community or the problem of faith and culture; and religion as a reconstructed liberalism. These perspectives point to the contextual development of Meland's view of religion, and our discussion of religion as a reconstructed liberalism serves as a summary insight into his general view.

Religion as the pathway to healthy living is developed mainly in *Modern Man's Worship* and *Write Your Own Ten Commandments*. This perspective asserts that religious living is an adequate adjustment to environing reality, that religious confidence comes through being at home in the universe, and that religious devotion is possible through an awareness of our cosmic relations. Such a religious perspective is a healthy, dynamic approach to life. This salutary religion is possible if one is able to develop an awareness and appreciation of reality. Religion is the reality-relating factor.

The problem for modern readers is whether we can have this salutary religion which enables us to live a healthy life. Meland contends that the great hindrance is to be found in the lingering effects of a supernatural religion. These lingering effects of supernaturalism can be stated in several ways. In one way, it can be said that in the passing of supernaturalism we have been left without a vivid awareness of our relation to objective reality. Another way of making the same point is by saying that our religious experience of reality, oriented to supernaturalism, has not kept up with our intellectual understanding of reality. Yet another way to make this point is in Meland's assertion that religion is bankrupt for modern persons, "if it must depend upon traditional concepts of reality."² In essence, a religion of supernaturalism hinders us from a religion rooted in a deep experience of reality and leaves us with a religion based simply on an intellectual assent to accepted doctrines. Meland argues that religion is the way of affirming our relation to that objective reality which enables us to fulfill our human nature. So long as supernatural religion blocks us from this objective reality, it blocks us from the affirmative mood which is the essence of healthy living.

Creighton Peden is Callaway Professor of Philosophy at Augusta College, Augusta, Georgia.

Meland believes this salutary or affirmative religion is

something which we must cultivate practically. We can cultivate an adequate religion (1) by worship and (2) by developing a growth design for living. Worship is art; it is the structure through which we develop religious responses into the aesthetic attitude projected to cosmic ends. A healthy religion is aesthetic in that it enables us to be aware of and to appreciate the depth of reality:

For worship, in the sense that we have developed in these pages, is an important counter-rhythm of the activism which has brought on much of our culture-disease. Worship may be the route by which modern man may return to the healing sources of his natural environment, and where he might come into adjustment with those most important conditions and realities affecting his life. Worship may be the means of re-orienting him in the environment that produced him, and of integrating the human species in the natural order of life that sustains and promotes organic growth.

This aesthetic, healthy religion places us in a depth relationship with reality; it transforms us by creating our orientation as a "lunge toward reality," a move toward union with the profound centers of life. "This experience of profound awareness and appreciation for the basic relationships between man and his cosmic environments is worship at its highest moments."⁴ The practical value of this aesthetic worship is that it creates affirmative attitudes toward reality. We no longer need the consolation of a pathological religion oriented to an illusion of reality. Being able to affirm objective reality, we now have a religion which is spiritually healthy, not spiritually sick. The essential value of worship is practical, in that it offers the aesthetic attitude for returning to the healing sources of reality.⁵ Meland's criterion of a religion is whether it enables us to be affirmative in a healthy way in relation to reality.

The other aspect of this healthy religion is found in the development of a growth design for living. Such a design is the practical manner in which one tries to create the conditions necessary for constructively relating oneself to objective reality. This design involves the following features: (1) being realistic about one's abilities, (2) trying to live "intelligently in relation to social and professional demands,"⁶ (3) thinking success rather than failure, and (4) learning how to compromise. In essence, this practically oriented religion is a matter of learning how to live as a mature, inquiring, and constructive person affirming one's contextual existence instead of being pathologically oriented. According to Meland, those activities in the universe which help bring about growth towards authentic existence are God. Since the nature of humans is

created in the image of these activities, this pattern of growth is the proper way of living in order to have a fulfilled existence. Religion is the way in which one affirms relation to these activities, and it is the way in which one attempts to live constructively with these activities. Thus, religion is an aesthetic experience of the objective reality "God" and includes practical attempts to create the conditions through which God can enable one to grow in God's image.

Our second perspective is that religion is a pathway for the development of a healthy or spiritual culture. This perspective is emphasized during the development of his more social interest in the 1940's. Meland contends that religion is essentially cultural and that religion should give constructive aid to the task of culture. He argues that Protestant religion has not been performing this religious function adequately. The peril of Protestant religion, historically and in its present manifestation, is twofold. On the one hand, it has tended to separate us from culture, giving emphasis to an "other-worldliness" by asserting culture to be secular or non-religious:

Why this uprooting of religion in modern culture?...The issue goes deeper than political strategy...The real issue, however, lay in the relation of historic differences between a cultural outlook concerned with emerging values in the present world process and a faith that looked away from the world of life. Potentially these historic faiths are insecure in every modern culture where there is concern for promoting these emergent values.⁷

On the other hand, Protestant religion has given emphasis to protestation rather than to construction and to affirmation. This protestation can be seen today in the negative orientation of religion to the present and to the future, in its affirmation that essential religious value can be found only in the tradition. The most important example of this protestation is the refusal to give constructive emphasis to the good in life by emphasizing evil. By taking this negative stand, religion blocks the spiritual development of culture and becomes a malignant growth.

The point we are insisting upon is that in every contemporary culture--and this applies especially to the West, where religious tradition tends to insulate itself and its cultus from the dynamic configuration we call the living culture, that is, a culture that moves experimentally toward new social ends, and responds creatively to new discoveries, new inventions, new technological advances, and thus to new human insights--religion develops as a malignant growth within the social organism, which becomes increasingly unassimilative and predatory. And when the situation becomes critical, removal of the malignant growth seems inevitable.⁸

The true task of religion is to find and promote the good that is in culture. In other words, religion must designate and promote the spirit of God which is revealed in culture. This spiritual quality must not be asserted in any illusory fashion but must be demonstrated empirically. This spiritual culture is more than a hoped-for-dream; it is a direction of living, an orientation of faith, a mythos created in humans and the culture by God:

But the spirit of a culture is more than its tradition; it is to be found in the living hopes and dedications, in the discontents and aspirations, in the decision-making processes that carry the group life forward to yet unrealized goals.

Spirit is in the wakening life of our nation, the new growths that have hardly broken through the soil, yet give promise of reclaiming the wasted and decadent regions. Spirit is in the sentiments and wills of enlightened people, seeking through education and experimentation, and ultimately through legislation, to carry America's culture into a new day of maturity and spiritual well-being. Spirit is the wealth of new voices singing of America's dream.⁹

The process of demonstrating and promoting the spiritual aspect of culture should be initiated by giving a constructive philosophy of values and practical steps for fulfilling the spiritual culture. This philosophy of values should be based on the realization that one can fulfill the more adequate conditions for growth by living in a constructive relationship with one's fellow humans and with the contextual factors of the environment. Some of the practical steps are to realize that religion in culture must always be a compromise and that all institutions must work with organized religion to bring about the growth of spiritual culture. Meland emphasizes the need for institutions, such as education, government and business, to accept the responsibility of working to bring about the spiritual culture. Organized religion has a special prophetic function, in relation to these other institutions of culture, by pointing out the objective good and calling upon these institutions to accept their religious responsibility of making this good more vivid, from their perspective, and to accept the responsibility of promoting the development of the good in order that the spiritual culture can grow. Thus, true religion is creative, "the stimulus to wrest from our daily living the significance that is there to be attained."¹⁰ To perform its function, then, religion must be constructive, not reactionary. It must designate the spiritual good of culture empirically and promote prophetically and constructively the growth of this spiritual good. Its affirmation of the good is not done by ignoring evil. It is the nature of religion to be constructive. Evil is taken seriously, in order that a true constructive pathway can be designated by which the growth of spiritual culture can occur.

Our emphasis now shifts to religion as the pathway to salvation. Meland distinguishes between two levels of faith: primordial and transcendent. A person is created by God having a primordial faith. Religion is the way in which that person opens up in order that the grace of God can bring about redemptive, transcendent faith. Meland's method is to be followed, not for the previous purpose of healthy living, but now for the purpose of being saved by God. Religion is the carrying out of this method in such a way that the conditions are created in which God can confront us with God's judgment and through God's grace enable us to respond positively. An essential part of our response to God's judgment and grace is repentance on our part. Again, God's grace is not a "cheap grace." We must be responsively repentant in order that reconciliation can occur through grace. Thus, religion becomes the way by which we keep a creative tension between faith and our intellectual capacities, in order that God can fulfill God's image in us through redemptive love.

Our fourth perspective views religion as the problem of the individual in community. Meland takes the statement of the problem in this manner from Whitehead. Meland's theological position is framed within the context of process metaphysics, in which a cardinal doctrine is the theory of relativity. In the view of relativity, all events are contextually relative. At the same time each event retains its own uniqueness. This view contends that the uniqueness of the individual is retained while at the same time the contextual relativity of the events is affirmed.

Meland takes this metaphysical view and applies it to people and their religion. He asserts that the mystery of creation is "that individuation occurs simultaneously with socialization."¹¹ It is necessary that one retain and develop one's own unique, subjective life; but one must do this always in relation to the community. When a person denies communal relations, too great an emphasis is given to self-centered existence which is sin. In sin a person's understanding of one's depth dimensions and responsibility is limited. Only as the individual is kept in creative tension with the community is it possible to gain true freedom:

In this context the meaning of men enlarges because selfhood itself widens and deepens its bounds. Freedom also changes in meaning. In addition to connoting a measure of independent judgment or decision as well as flexibility, it means, in this context, freedom to have relations, freedom to avail one's self of the grace and power which relationships can bestow. The atomism of the autonomous self thus gives way to a sound sense of the community of being and responsibility, as well as the opportunity, of being fulfilled within such a creative nexus.¹²

Meland is careful to point out that the relation of the individual to the community is not just sociological, in the sense that each person has relations with the group. He asserts this relationship "in the ontological sense that all individuated existence arises from a communal ground and derives its meaning from its continual, dramatic encounter with the activities of judgment and grace issuing from that communal ground."¹³ Meland believes that God creates people in God's own image and also creates the culture in God's image through the work of the "spirit" expressed in the mythos. An individual has a unique relationship with God and people in community also have a unique relationship with God. God encounters persons through the human structures which God has created; and if we give emphasis to one of these structures to the extent that the other is denied or not given its proper role, then we cannot be in adequate relationship with God. Thus, the problem of religion becomes that of creating the proper conditions for receiving God's grace by keeping our individual uniqueness in tension with our community relations.

The relationship between the problem of the individual in community and the problem of faith and culture should be self-evident. God relates to us through God's primordial faith and through the mythos of culture. It is necessary that we relate our primordial faith to the mythos of culture, if we are to have an adequate relationship with God. If we do not take seriously God's revelation in culture, we develop a self-centered existence which separates us from God. Redemption cannot occur when we are separated from the cultural aspect of God's revelation; thus, the transcendental act of faith cannot occur unless a creative tension is retained between the primordial faith and the mythos of culture. This is but another way of saying that we are in sin and cannot be saved because we deny our community-nature, created in the image of God, by giving an exaggerated emphasis to self-centered existence. If we are to be redeemed by God's grace, we must keep a creative tension between faith and culture, between the individual and community. Thus, the true problem of religion is the problem of the individual in community.

In order to gain a summary perspective of Meland's general position, we shall consider his theology as a "reconstructed liberalism." Meland looks at the contemporary situation and sees several things. Traditional liberalism has failed to meet the needs of the time for several reasons: (1) it has been too optimistic and has not taken evil seriously;¹⁴ (2) it has stressed a humanistic Jesus instead of Christology;¹⁵ (3) its imagery has not kept pace with contemporary imagery made possible by "new physics";¹⁶ (4) its doctrine of God has been oriented with the context of a supernatural view of transcendence;¹⁷ (5) its method is limited because of a pseudo-scientific nineteenth century framework of reference;¹⁸ and, (6) its ethical concern has been so present as to imply that Christianity is of practical

but not of distinctive intellectual importance.¹⁹ In essence, traditional liberalism has become "fundamentalistic," in that it has not reconstructed its position in order to make the Christian faith relevant to contemporary persons within our changing world view. As a counter force to traditional liberalism, Meland sees neo-orthodox or neo-supernatural theology becoming the dominant view of religion.²⁰ He asserts that this position is limited for several reasons: (1) it is reactionary instead of constructive;²¹ (2) it has placed an undue stress on evil instead of good and the promotion of good;²² (3) it separates faith and culture and the individual from the community by its emphasis upon otherworldliness;²³ (4) its doctrine of God and of Christology is inadequate because it is based on a supernatural imagery;²⁴ and (5) its method is limited because it is dependent upon a supernatural revelation and because it denies proper use of our God-given intellectual capacities.²⁵ In essence, this position is not adequate for modern people because it is reactionary rather than constructive and because it is based exclusively upon an imagery which is irrelevant to modern problems. Meland asserts that contemporary culture is oriented to the task of reconstruction and that, if religion is to participate adequately in this task, it also must be oriented to reconstruction. Neither the traditional liberal nor the neo-supernatural position has faced this task of reconstruction; and, consequently, a theological position must be developed which does embrace this task. Meland believes a reconstructed liberalism is that position.

The theology of Meland is liberal in that he accepts the responsibility of relating faith, armed with a relevant imagery and based on a scientifically oriented method, to contemporary people. He would see this position correcting traditional liberalism in the following way: (1) evil is taken seriously, although the emphasis is retained on constructive good; (2) Christology instead of the human Jesus becomes the cornerstone of the position; (3) the method is scientific, although a humbler role is assigned to reason and observation; (4) contemporary imagery is used instead of nineteenth century scientific imagery and supernatural imagery; (5) adequate stress is given in the doctrine of God to both transcendence and immanence by placing this doctrine within the context of process metaphysics; (6) adequate emphasis is given to the mystery or otherness of God without losing sight of God's empirical revelations and without having recourse to the concepts of supernaturalism; (7) adequate stress is given to the Bible as the primary document of our cultural mythos without making the mythological structure of the Bible normative; and (8) the traditional stress on the individual is corrected by a view which gives adequate stress to the individual and to the community in their interrelation. He also sees reconstructed liberalism correcting supernaturalism at several points: (1) it gives emphasis to the immanence of God; (2) it keeps faith and culture and faith and reason in a creative

tension; (3) it gives closer consideration to past and present schools of theology; (4) it takes philosophy and its imagery seriously into consideration in performing its theological task; (5) it is able to speak to contemporary people in a relevant imagery; (6) its method is based on faith but it takes seriously the important part played in God's revelation by our rational capacities; (7) it gives adequate emphasis to our sinful nature while at the same time affirming the good; (8) it stresses our responsibility in relation to God instead of allowing for a "cheap grace"; (9) it stresses the importance of myth and attempts to rescue myth from the confines of more limited mythology; and (10) it stresses that religion must be constructive instead of reactionary.

Meland sees two main problems for a reconstructed liberalism. One problem is that, in its reaction to traditional liberalism and neo-supernaturalism, it must not develop an exclusively futuristic orientation. If liberalism is to perform its religious task of reconstruction in relation to culture, liberalism must give due emphasis to history and to the developed insights of the mythos. To be a true witness to the Christian faith, it must be based on the tradition of the past, and be open to God's revelation in the present and in the future.²⁶

The most crucial problem is how "to employ such a tool of intelligibility as analogy in a way that preserves the tension between what is manageable and unmanageable in the deeper experiences of creaturely existence."²⁷ His concern is that the demands for logical analysis and radical empiricism will become so great that the liberal will begin to think one's terms actually do designate adequately the reality considered. If this occurs, the essence of reconstructed liberalism will be lost, in that the depth appreciation of mystery and myth will be lost. Meland is careful to point out that we must always be attentive to that dimension of existence which elicits our sense of creaturehood. In other words, this new liberalism must be careful not to become another form of "fundamentalism," in that it makes its imagery and theological expressions absolute and static. The essence of reconstructed liberalism is that it is always reconstructing its imagery, reconstructing its interpretation of the relationship between traditional and contemporary forms of myth, and reconstructing its religious tasks to meet the spiritual needs of the individual and the community within the context of our changing world.

In closing, we present a list of clues or tentative formulations by Meland for a reconstructed liberalism:

- (1) That the doctrine of immanence, which has given metaphysical orientation to the liberal position, can be substantially retained, though radically revised along lines

indicated by the concept of "structure of experience."

(2) That revision of this assumption that God works through the concrete structures of history must come at the point

(a) where liberalism has followed an idealistic practice of identifying these concrete structures with conscious events; and (b) where liberalism has tended to equate the human structure, either as mind or experience, with the creative working of God.

(3) That these corrections will be somewhat facilitated by a deeper conception of empiricism than historic liberalism has embraced...

(4) Immanence in this context presupposes transcendence as a category of differentiation in the sense that individuality and mutuality are simultaneously embraced, and God and humans represent distinct though related categories.

(5) In this revised doctrine of immanence, structure of experience becomes a basic concept...the bearer of all relevant meanings, including the seminal insights of the Christian myth informing our Christian faith.

(6) Access to the Christian faith is thus not a problem of relating the contemporary culture to a remote, historic event, as in the modernists' dilemma, but of attending to the depth of the immediate moment of the cultural structure of experience which bears, in its valuations, the witness of God's working in history and in the living moment--Jesus Christ, conveyed through the persisting drama of the myth.

(7) The meaning of the myth that God works on in history to redeem man through Christ is given in fragmentary form, wherever encountered...

(8) The myth that resides in the depth of the culture as valuation and motivation, and which is celebrated, attested to in the drama of ritual and song, is presented, clarified, and elaborated within a given historical context in the Biblical writings. The Bible is the primal source of the cultural motif that has been shaped into myth and, as such, is the primary document of our culture...The liberal will recover this document, not simply as a source of ethical teaching or of didactic discourse, but as a source of perennial renewal in sensibility to the deeply laid valuations of the culture wherein the sensitive nature of the living God is disclosed to our deepest sight.

(9) The valuations conveying the sensitive working of God are the historic responses to the good discerned in Christ as an event of sacrificial love, persuading us to receive the work of God's grace; yet witnessing to the "costingness" of this life of love, and to the judgment upon those who deny it.

(10) The church, understood as a community of men and women who have been awakened to the sovereign force of the Christian myth in culture, is the living witness to the revelation of God in Christ.²⁸

FOOTNOTES

1 For a broader evaluation of Meland's contribution consider *Bernard Meland and the Future of Theology*, *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy*, Vol. 5, Nos. 2 & 3.

2 B. E. Meland, *Modern Man's Worship*. London: Harper, 1934, p. 134.

3 *Ibid.*, p. xii-iii.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 269.

5 Confer B. E. Meland, *Modern Man's Worship*, p. 234; B. E. Meland, "The Criterion of the Religious Life," *Journal of Religion*, Vol. 19, p. 42; B. E. Meland, "Tradition and New Frontiers," *Christendom*, 1940, p. 330; B. E. Meland, "The Mystic Returns," *Journal of Religion*, Vol 17, p. 159.

6 B. E. Meland, *Write Your Own Ten Commandments*. Chicago: Willett, Clark & Co., 1938, p. 43.

7 B. E. Meland, *America's Spiritual Culture*. New York: Macmillan, 1948, p. 39-40.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 42.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 91.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 158.

11 B. E. Meland, *Faith and Culture*. London: George Allen Unwin Ltd., 1955, p. 133.

12 B. E. Meland, *The Realities of Faith*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1962, p. 133.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 227.

14 Confer, B. E. Meland, *America's Spiritual Culture*, p. 66.

15 Confer, B. E. Meland, "A Present-Day Evaluation of Christian Ethics," *Journal of Religion*, Vol. 10, p. 378ff.; B. E. Meland, "The Present Worth of Jesus," *International Journal of Ethics*, Vol. 42, p. 326.

16 Confer, B. E. Meland, "Analogy and Myth in Post-Liberal Theology," unpublished, (*The Perkins School of Theology Journal*, Vol. IV), p. 9; B. E. Meland, "The New Realism in Religious Inquiry," unpublished, p. 8.

17 Confer, B. E. Meland, *Modern Man's Worship*, p. 147; B. E. Meland, "Toward a Valid View of God," *Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 24, p. 197.

18. Confer, B. E. Meland, *America's Spiritual Culture*, p. 27; B. E. Meland, "Analogy and Myth in Post-Liberal Theology," unpublished (*The Perkins School of Theology Journal*, Vol XV), p. 12.

19 Confer, B. E. Meland, *The Reawakening of Christian Faith*, New York: Macmillan, 1949, p. 3-4; B. E. Meland, *Seeds of Redemption*, New York: Macmillan, 1947, p. 39, 45; B. E. Meland, "Interpreting the Christian Faith within a Philosophical Framework," *Journal of Religion*, Vol 33, p. 95.

20 Confer, B. E. Meland, "Some Unresolved Issues in Theology," *Journal of Religion*, Vol. 24, p. 237.

21 Confer, B. E. Meland, *The Reawakening of Christian Faith*, p. 88-89.

22 Confer, B. E. Meland, *America's Spiritual Culture*, p. 66; B. E. Meland, "Some Unresolved Issues in Theology," *Journal of Religion*, Vol. 24, p. 237.

23 Confer, B. E. Meland, "Some Unresolved Issues in Theology," *Journal of Religion*, Vol. 24, p. 234; B. E. Meland, "Interpreting the Christian Faith within a Philosophical Framework," *Journal of Religion*, Vol. 33, p. 95; B. E. Meland, *Modern Man's Worship*, p. 146-7; B. E. Meland, *America's Spiritual Culture*, p. 37.

24 Confer, B. E. Meland, *Modern Man's Worship*, p. 133.

25 Confer, B. E. Meland, "Theology and the Historian of Religion," *Journal of Religion*, Vol. XLI, p. 267; B. E. Meland, *Modern Man's Worship*, p. 132-3, B. E. Meland, *America's Spiritual Culture*, p. 77.

26 Meland sees this false orientation to the future to be a special threat to those who live within the American culture. Confer, B. E. Meland, "Tradition and New Frontiers," *Christendom*, 1940, p. 327.

27 B. E. Meland, "Analogy and Myth in Post-Liberal Theology," unpublished (*The Perkins School of Theology Journal*, Vol. XV), p. 13.

28 B. E. Meland, *Faith and Culture*, p. 59-61. For an earlier statement concerning the direction for a reconstructed liberalism, confer B. E. Meland, *Seeds of Redemption*, p. 48.

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