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COMMENTARY ON THEOLOGICAL RESOURCES
FROM THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

by *Henry Nelson Wieman*

Wallace has shown that religion is in a rather desperate predicament, and I think that is correct. Religion is groping to find its distinctive vocation in the present world situation. I also agree that religion is based upon ritual, but, as he says, that does not distinguish religion. Every sort of undertaking in life is based upon ritual. No baby can be reared without the ritual of caressing and hugging and cooing. One cannot maintain married life without a lot of rituals.

Ritual is absolutely indispensable in every serious undertaking. Science, too, has its rituals. It has its conferences where things are discussed, but those conferences are partly ritual to maintain esprit de corps and the co-operation and fellowship of scientists. Certainly government could not be maintained without rituals. So to say that religion is based upon rituals does not distinguish religion in any way. In fact, I would say that perhaps married life has more ritual in it than religion.

Ritual serves different goals when used in the diverse areas of human concern. The goal is different when saluting the flag or shaking hands or saying good morning to a passing acquaintance; and all these differ from what is served by ritual in religion. While the ends sought are

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different in all these cases, the function of ritual in all instances is the same. The function is always to mobilize and direct the resources of the individual and the group to sustain and promote some interest. In religion the function of ritual is to mobilize and direct the resources of human life to meet the requirements of what creates, sustains, and transforms human existence toward the greatest good. Preaching is an important part of religious ritual. Religions differ in what they understand this creativity to be, whether natural or supernatural, actual or ideal.

Relative to this function of religious ritual, this conference seeks an answer to three questions:

1. How can science help us attain a better understanding of this creativity and the conditions under which it can operate most effectively?

2. How can science help us meet these required conditions, provided, first, that religious ritual has mobilized and directed our powers so that we try to do this in every time of major decision?

3. What kind of ritual is most effective in accomplishing this religious function under the psychological and social conditions of our time?

Science can give us the knowledge; but religious ritual must give us the ruling commitment for this creative transformation of our existence. Of these three questions, the first is most important because, if it is answered incorrectly, the other answers will also be incorrect.

We can approach this first question by going back to the four questions asked by Wald. His first was this: Cannot theology, like science, go from question to question? If it did, I ask, would theology have a question distinctively its own, central to theology alone?

Wald is correct in making this the first consideration in any approach between science and theology, because science can do nothing for theology unless theology has a central question distinctively theological.

The reason for this is that the only thing science can do for theology is to help it answer some question when the answer lies in the field of scientific inquiry and when the question represents the true function of theology. Merely to take over the findings of science without regard to whether they answer questions distinctively theological is to betray the cause of theology and subvert it into a popularizer of science without distinctive function of its own. On the other hand, when science tries to answer questions outside the field of scientific inquiry, it becomes a popular pretense of science, bringing both science and theology into disrepute.

Therefore the first requirement, when theology and science seek to engage in co-operative inquiry, is to be clear on the theological questions which the co-operative inquiry seeks to answer. This is necessary to protect us from illusions disguised under the semblance of truth because they falsely bear the name of science and theology.

With this understanding of the primary importance of Wald's challenge, may I suggest a formulation of the central question theology seeks to answer. As I see it, the central theological question is this: What operates to create and sustain, save and transform the human being toward the greatest good human existence can ever attain?

Theologians differ in what they say about what operates in this way. Some say it is supernatural; others say it is natural in the sense of being a process operating not only at the biological level but also at the level of human personality, society, culture, and history. Some say it operates exclusively in human existence; others say it is cosmic. Some say it is not an actual process but an ideal or set of ideals or a cosmic vision.

Before science and theology can engage in a co-operative inquiry, theologians must agree on how they interpret this central theological question. Is the answer to be sought in the supernatural or in the temporal process of existence? If a temporal process, is it cosmic or is it limited to human existence? If limited to human existence, is it an actual process of creativity or is it in the realm of the ideal, such as the ideal most inclusive of all values, or a sequence of ideals, or a cosmic vision?

If theologians cannot agree on some one of these diverse interpretations of the theological question, they cannot co-operate with science because the first demand to be met in scientific inquiry is a formulation of the question in such a way as to indicate where the answer is to be sought.

For myself I hold that the answer to the central theological question is to be found in the form of a creativity operating in human existence and not to be found anywhere else unless some of the planets scattered throughout the galactic systems have life which embodies this kind of creativity.

Some say that the central theological question is about the universe. But "universe" has three different meanings which should never be confused. With one meaning it refers to all reality. But all reality is infinitely beyond all possibility of knowing. We do not even know enough about it to ask a question concerning it. All the sciences together know only a fragmentary bit of reality, and this fragmentary bit is today undergoing rapid change with new scientific discoveries. It is

foolish to ask a question about the unknowable; and on this account theology is foolish when it asks about all reality.

A second meaning of "universe" is the physical and chemical processes pervading all of space and time. But these taken by themselves alone, apart from the way they merge into human existence, are not relevant to the theological question because this question is about the nature and destiny of man and not about physical and chemical processes for their own sake.

The third meaning of "universe" is the physical, chemical, biological, psychological, social, cultural, and historical, all merged into one unity. But "universe" in this sense is found nowhere except in human existence. (There may be levels rising higher than man, but we do not know anything about them.)

The conclusion from all this is plain. The only universe of interest to theology is human existence. This is so because theology is not interested in the physical and chemical apart from the biological, nor interested in these apart from the psychological, nor in these apart from the social, nor in these apart from human culture and the continuity of history. But all this is precisely human existence and nothing else. Also, it is the only universe when "universe" includes all levels of existence.

Now to Wald's second question. Does theology accept all reality? No, because no one knows what all reality might be. Also, "acceptance" is ambiguous. If it means acceptance of every proposition supported by available evidence, the kind of theology here defended does so, although that is not true of all theologies. But if "acceptance" means to accept error, illusion, cancer and other ills, raw nature unfit for human existence, and much of that sort, no. All reality of this sort we should try to change in such a way as to promote the creativity operating in human life.

In answer to Wald's third question—Do theologians believe in immortality?—yes, many do. But some do not, and these are increasing in numbers.

The fourth question is: Do theologians believe there is an external agency which hears the words of our prayers so that it can answer them? Yes, many do. I myself do not. But prayer is an essential religious ritual whereby the individual and the group are brought more fully under control of devotion to the creativity which expands indefinitely the range of values accessible to man's evaluation. Also, prayer may be a question by which the whole devoted personality seeks an answer from that creativity which transforms the valuing consciousness so that it can find values where it could not previously discern them and thus rise triumphant out of predicaments otherwise insurmountable.

This indefinite expansion of the valuing consciousness is the greatest good ever to be attained in the universe. Only in this way is the universe endowed with the values of truth, beauty, love, justice, freedom, and responsible power, because these values emerge only when some valuing consciousness brings them into being by its capacity for appreciation and responsibility. But even in human existence these values cannot be progressively created unless our existence is brought under the control of the creativity which expands the valuing consciousness. If this is to happen, our lives must be dominated by devotion to this creativity, and this can happen only by proper use of religious ritual.

COMMENTARY ON THEOLOGICAL RESOURCES FROM THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

by Melford Spiro

Wallace's paper is certainly one of the finest syntheses of what we know about religion not only from anthropology but from the behavioral sciences in general. To find fault with it is difficult, and the only questions I want to raise are those not concerning the substantive and analytic aspects of the paper (with which I agree wholeheartedly) but with some of the latter parts of the paper concerning predictions for the future.

One could, of course, take issue with some minor points in the more analytic part of the paper. I am not sure I agree that ritual does take precedence over myth. Indeed, one could say that the very notion of ritual presupposes the priority of myth if only in the sense that it is the cognitive aspects of the myth upon which the efficacy of the ritual is predicated. In short, in order for me to perform a ritual, I have to believe in the first place that ritual is efficacious.

Let me move to Wallace's predictions. If the gods are dead (a conclusion I share), I then wonder to what extent the notion of a godless theology is either possible or desirable. I would ask this with respect to both the substantive and the functional aspects of religion to which he has addressed himself. If, as Wallace says, the fundamental premise of every religion is belief in some kind of spirits, an incontrovertible point when religions are viewed cross-culturally, then a godless re-

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