

HOW EMPIRICAL IS WIEMAN'S THEOLOGY?

by *Tyron Inbody*

Abstract. The essay is a response to the papers written by Nancy Frankenberry and Charley Hardwick in the March 1987 issue of *Zygon*. Questions are raised about whether Wieman's theology is functionalist in the way described by Frankenberry and whether Hardwick's proposal to establish the logical possibility of naturalism as a framework for an existential interpretation of the Christian message is satisfactory. The most basic question raised by both papers is whether Wieman's theology is fully empirical when viewed from the point of view of the radical empiricist.

Keywords: empirical theology; Bernard Loomer; Bernard Meland; philosophy of religion; radical empiricism; Henry Nelson Wieman.

Scientists, philosophers of religion, and theologians who locate in empirical philosophy the key for interpreting theological problems will discover in these two essays constructive contributions to the development of an empirical philosophy of religion. All process-relational theologies ground their conceptual frameworks in an appeal to experience and naturalism broadly conceived. However, the rationalistic strain in some process theologies has obscured the empirical grounding of such thinking and has pointed beyond what is given in experience. As a result, some scientists and philosophers have become disenchanted with the contribution of process theology to a thoroughly empirical interpretation of theological concerns.

Both Nancy Frankenberry and Charley Hardwick call us back to the more directly empirical grounding of process-relational theology. They do this by employing a critical analysis and evaluation of the empirical theology of Henry Nelson Wieman. They also advance the discussion of the meaning and promise of empirical theology beyond

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the stage of the discussion summarized nearly two decades ago in *The Future of Empirical Theology* (Meland 1969a). I applaud this advancement of the discussion, but in the end I want to ask whether Wieman's empiricism is radical enough to give us a thoroughly empirical grounding of theological discussion.

Both of these papers move the discussion of religious empiricism forward by offering new interpretations of Wieman and naturalism. Frankenberry's paper carries the critical analysis of Wieman beyond the anthology edited by Robert Bretall (1963) into the more recent discussion of empiricism in philosophy. She evaluates Wieman's empiricism in the light of these recent philosophical discussions. Hardwick's paper is a positive proposal about the appropriateness of naturalism as the philosophical framework for the constructive theological task. There is much in both papers with which I agree. Instead of reiterating these points I would like to move forward the discussion both of Wieman and religious empiricism by posing an issue raised by each of the papers and then an even more fundamental one raised by both.

Frankenberry's paper does not address directly the broad question of the meaning of the notion of *empirical* in Wieman's philosophy of religion.¹ Rather, she asks the more specific question of how empirical his method is when measured against the three dominant empirical methods in contemporary philosophy.

To say Wieman's thinking is empirical is to say that it appeals to experience, namely, to common if not universal human experience as the grounds for any claims it makes (Ogden 1969, 65, 67). It is possible to be empirical in this sense without being self-conscious and explicit about a particular method. However, *empirical* also refers more narrowly to empirical method, that is, to the formulation of empirical theories by which to determine the truth of religious claims about the ultimate character of the world. Frankenberry's paper contributes much to an understanding of Wieman's empirical method by analyzing his thought in relation to the canons of three types of empirical method in current philosophy.

The first major section of her paper argues that Wieman's empirical method is functionalist according to Carl Hempel's formulation of it, and then shows that Wieman's functionalist argument will not work because it entails the fallacy of affirming the consequent, namely, it cannot show both the sufficient and the necessary conditions to explain empirically the creative event itself.

I find no fault in the logic of her argument against Wieman on this point. My question is whether Wieman's argument is functionalist in the strict sense described in this first section of the paper, specifically,

Hempel's formulation of it. She argues that it is, in the sense that Wieman claims the truth of his concept of the being of God is established by arguing that his concept of God provides both the sufficient and the necessary grounds by which to understand creative transformation.

Yet, it seems to me that Wieman's argument is not primarily functionalist in Frankenberry's sense but is more pragmatic, or what Wieman himself calls "experimental." A representative statement of Wieman's makes the pragmatic character of his claim clear. "Truth, then, consists of concepts put into the form of beliefs that can be verified by way of experimental operations. The experimental verification does not make them true. They may be true before they are verified. But it is only with respect to experimental operations that they are true. To be true implies some claim concerning the consequences of experimentation, whether or not the experimentation is ever carried out. It is only with reference to some experimental operation, past, present, or future, actual or possible, that a belief can be true" (Wieman 1928, 22). His theory of God as he presents it is an instrument, not an answer to an enigma or a logically necessary condition. It is instrumental in the sense that by locating the meaning of God "scientifically," the idea enhances our devotion to creative interchange in our daily living. This idea is true because it succeeds better than any other in formulating what works in living for creative transformation.

It seems to me, however, that this formulation of the argument is significantly different from arguing that such an analysis provides not only sufficient understanding but logically necessary conditions for devotion to creative interchange. Clearly, some of the more "rationalistic" empiricists want to argue for such rational necessity, and there are certainly claims of clarity and certainty in Wieman's writings. Also, his pragmatism or experimentalism is certainly subject to criticism. However, I think it is not subject to refutation in the way or at least to the degree that Frankenberry does by measuring it against Hempel's formulation.

I understand Hardwick's project essentially to be to "clear a space" for a "naturalistically grounded existential interpretation" of the kerygma, the Christian message. The broad argument goes like this: Any interpretation of the kerygma does require a conceptual content of the kerygma; but that conceptual content is an existential content, not a metaphysical one. Therefore, the kerygma is metaphysically neutral. Consequently, a naturalistic framework for an existential interpretation of the kerygma is possible.

Even if one grants the argument that the conceptual content of the kerygma is fully existential and therefore not metaphysical in any usual

meaning of that term—which is at least debatable—the question, which Hardwick does acknowledge, is not primarily the question of possibility. An argument for the logical possibility of supernaturalistic theism as compatible with the reality of evil has been made (successfully, I think) by such classical theists as Alvin Plantinga (Plantinga 1974, Part I,a) and Stephen Davis (Davis 1981, 68-83). However, the question is not the logical possibility either of classical theism or naturalistic theology. The logical possibility of an almost limitless number of ideas can be established. The question is what makes naturalism more plausible than supernaturalistic theism as a framework for an interpretation of the kerygma. My own guess is that naturalistic scientists and philosophers of religion will be satisfied no more than classical theists by his plausibility suggestions.

Specifically, the last three points in the final paragraph, which push beyond possibility to plausibility, are not a naturalistic or empirical grounding of the kerygma but rather something like a correlation between the kerygma whose grounding is taken for granted and an empirically grounded philosophy of religion and God. For example, the argument is that the creative/created distinction of Wieman's thought conforms to or correlates with the Pauline faith/unfaith distinction. The kerygma, it seems to me, stands fully independent in such an argument from a naturalistically grounded concept of God. One might want to do this for theological reasons or on independent theological grounds; but then, how naturalistic or empirical is such a theology?

The method Hardwick advances here serves to leave unexamined empirically the grounds for the Christian kerygma and its conceptual content however one conceives it. Yet, the general proposal of the paper is for a thoroughgoing application of the naturalistic framework to the theological task. If one approaches the question of religion and God from a strictly empirical point of view, the questions are not simply—or even primarily—the logically compatible possibilities or the best framework within which to interpret the kerygma (the search for a naturalistic framework), but the search for the empirical grounds and character of religion and God as such within the world (an empirical philosophy of religion). The slogan I would propose is: no naturalistic theology apart from an empirical philosophy of religion.

This brings me to the most fundamental issues raised by both papers. If the search for a thoroughly empirical grounding in theological matters is the task of empirical theology, how satisfactory is Wieman's theology as a search for empirical grounding? Unquestionably he is one of the most available beginning points for an empirical philosophy of religion. Yet, radical as his thinking is about God in relation to

traditional theism, question must be raised as to whether it is radical enough for a thoroughly empirical theology.

I will press the issue by way of a direct question. Where did Wieman get his definition of God? Specifically, where did he get his unremitting confidence in an ultimate dimension of reality that is singular and unambiguous? Did he get it from a radical appeal to experience or from an assumption about the nature of God that comes from something or somewhere other than a thoroughgoing appeal to experience? From the perspective of the radical empiricist, one can detect in Wieman's concept of God a hangover of high Calvinism or the persistence of a veiled absolute derived from Josiah Royce's and William Ernest Hocking's idealism (Meland 1969b, 35-36). Indeed, from such a perspective, the genius of Wieman's thought might be that he held together the legacies of absolute idealism and empiricism. However, our question is how thoroughly empirical is his thought.

What happens in an empirical philosophy of religion if one begins one's inquiry as a radical empiricist? That question has been posed about Wieman's thought before. For example, Bernard Meland has argued as a radical empiricist that the forces or sustaining activities for a good not our own in the universe are not, according to our experience taken in the most elemental forms, synthesized through one activity or unified in one actuality but are plural realities unified only in each actual occasion or individual event (Meland 1934, 179). Thus, Meland, unlike Wieman, has an ambiguous and tenuous concept of God because that is what a radical appeal to experience offers.²

In the empirical-naturalistic approach to theological matters, God and the world are identified in the sense that the being of God is not independent of the being of the world. The question is how God is to be identified with the world within a strictly empirical perspective. Charles Hartshorne's answer identifies God with the unity of the world or the world order. Alfred North Whitehead's answer identifies God with the principle of order or "the principle of concretion." Although Wieman differs significantly from both by refusing on empirical grounds to identify God with the unity or order of the world, he nevertheless identifies God with or as one aspect of the world or one kind of process within the world, namely, creative transformation.

What all three share in common from the point of view of radical empiricists such as Meland and Bernard Loomer is that their concept of God finally is an abstraction from the richness, complexity, and ambiguity of the concrete character of God and the world given in experience. To identify God with one aspect of the world in its fullness is an abstraction from the interconnected world. As Loomer says, "My contention is that Wieman's God . . . is not concretely actual. Both as a

concrete process and as a process with a distinguishable and unambiguous structure, Wieman's God does not concretely exist. It is a high abstraction from the world of events. Wieman has described something that actually occurs, namely, the fact of transformation. He has also identified some of the phases and dimensions of this transformation. But the actuality of the process of transformation does not conform to Wieman's description of it (Loomer 1979, 59). The creative event is an unambiguous event for Wieman. Such a characteristic of the event can be derived only by an abstraction from the event and not from an account of the event in its fullness.³

Given the nature of the world as we experience it, any concept of God derived by empirical method must see God in full actuality to be involved in the ambiguity of the world. In the light of such considerations as the composite nature of individuals, the interconnectedness of all events, the dynamics of life, and the mixture of good and evil in all events, we experience the world as essentially ambiguous, not essentially as unity or order. A thoroughly naturalistic-empirical theology must derive the concept of God from this rich reality, not from an abstraction about the unambiguous God of unity, order, or principle on the assumption that God must be a unified, unambiguous principle.⁴

The constructive question from an empirical point of view is the nature of the unity of this series of interconnected events of the world within which God is to be identified. A thoroughly empirical identification of God would identify God as a unity or wholeness with the totality of the struggling web of interconnected events. Such an identification would include complexity as well as unity, dissonance as well as coherence, ambiguity as well as order, because the actual experience of this universal web includes evil, waste, false starts, and all sorts of limitations and negativities as well as their opposites.

The question for the radical empiricist is finally the question of evidence. From such a perspective unambiguity (whether through a principle of unity, order, structure, or creative transformation) must appear to be an abstraction. Of course, unity and order are abstract qualities of our concrete experience of the world and of God, just as are plurality and diversity. However, we are left with two different questions. First, what is the nature of this unity and order? Is it an absolute (original or final) universal principle, or "the kind of unity the term 'web' suggests, namely, that of a generalized enduring society?" (Loomer 1979, 41). Second, why is priority or exclusiveness given to one over the other characteristics of the world and deity? Why would an empirical description of God identify God with an abstract quality of the world instead of the world in its rich and complex fullness?⁵ Even if

an intuition of order or the rational necessity of order or a revelation of order is granted, that claim still does not establish ultimate order or order as the ultimate principle of reality or order as the definitive quality of deity. Pure experience is much richer and more ambiguous in its offerings about what the world—and so God—is like. Perhaps some form of pluralism (or even some version of polytheism, as Frankenberry cautiously suggests at the end of her paper) ought to replace or at least qualify the absolutistic bias of monotheism.

The question of which God is worthy of worship is, of course, important. Whether one can be devoted to the God of radical empiricism is debatable but is beyond the scope of this response. Yet, why one would (or should) be devoted to an abstraction is a question radical empiricists with their commitment to the data of experience in all its fullness must ask of more traditional conceptions of God. My point is that I doubt that an unambiguous deity can be posited from a strictly empirical point of view. On this particular issue Wieman's empiricism seems to be closer to Hartshorne and Whitehead than to Meland and Loomer. Thus the struggle within the process-relational mode of thought persists between the rational empiricists and the radical empiricists.

NOTES

1. One of the best discussions of this is in Huston Smith (1963, 244-56).
2. Cf. esp. Meland (1934, chap. 7, esp. 176-81). Cf. also Meland (1980, 71-82) and Loomer (1984, 138-43), and Meland's response in Meland (1984, 144-55).
3. My point here is that Wieman's creative event is unambiguous and hence an abstraction from the rich diversity of human experience. This point is to be distinguished from Wieman's own point that "creativity" is an abstraction from "creative event," which he makes in the "Technical Postscript" in *The Source of Human Good*. "Creativity and the creative event are inseparable, but the two words carry an important distinction in meaning. Creativity is the character, the structure, or form which the event must have to be creative. Creativity is therefore an abstraction. The concrete reality is the creative event" (1946, 299). My point is that the "creative event" itself is an abstraction from the rich valuational ambiguity of pure experience.
4. Meland says, "Thus, while Wieman made much of applying the scientific method to religious meaning . . . what was observed, as some of his critics contended, was not experience or the data provided by experience, but a pattern of happenings presumed to be implicit in these concrete awarenesses, but discernible only to those who shared his vision of reality" (Meland 1969b, 37-38). A somewhat similar though not identical point is made by John Cobb (1962, 117-18).
5. One of the strongest recent proponents for this point of view was Bernard Loomer (1984, esp. 140-42).

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