

Healing Broken Bodies: The Missional Ecclesiology Behind J. H. Oldham's Middle Axioms

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This essay explores J. H. Oldham's development of the middle axiom approach, in particular the missional ecclesiology that framed it, found in the publications he developed for the Oxford Conference in 1937 on "Church, Community, and State." With this framing ecclesiology established, it becomes clear that Oldham's approach better accommodates criticisms of middle axioms that have arisen in ecumenical and Anglican social ethics. Further, it becomes possible to distinguish Oldham's middle axiom approach from that of later practitioners, in particular William Temple and Ronald Preston. Finally, the modifications required for a retrieval of Oldham's approach in contemporary social ethics are considered.

"Life becomes real when we face our own responsibilities."
— J. H. Oldham¹

When discussing middle axioms, it has become commonplace to cite J. H. Oldham's early definition in *The Church and Its Function in Society* (1937) before turning to other expositors, such as William Temple or Ronald Preston.² This is reasonable, given the pivotal role later proponents played in shaping the middle axiom tradition in Anglican and ecumenical ethics.³ However, this practice obscures

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¹ J. H. Oldham and W. A. Visser 't Hooft, *The Church and Its Function in Society* (New York: Willet, Clark & Co., 1937), 149.

² See, for example, Duncan B. Forrester, *Beliefs, Values and Policies: Conviction Politics in a Secular Age* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 16–35.

³ On Temple, see Malcolm Brown, "Politics as the Church's Business: William Temple's *Christianity and Social Order* Revisited," *Journal of Anglican Studies* 5, no. 2 (2007): 163–186, and Alan M. Suggate, *William Temple and Christian Social Ethics Today* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1987), 28–41, 148–151.

Oldham's distinctive understanding of middle axioms, which this essay seeks to retrieve. For Oldham, the middle axiom approach not only provided a pragmatic strategy for mediating between Christian ideals and particular social policies, as they are often understood,⁴ but they expressed a way of being the church in the world. Oldham therefore formulated his middle axioms within an ecclesiology that is crucial for understanding how he believed they properly operated.

Specifically, Oldham believed that middle axioms derived from a missional ecclesiology that shaped the political activity of the church in the public sphere. Accordingly, Oldham viewed middle axioms as a way of creatively practicing the politics of the kingdom in an increasingly secular world. The middle axiom approach enabled the church to engage in wider consultation, deliberation, and action that worked in ad hoc ways to effect social transformation. The church that practiced middle axioms was not an established church or an ideal society (*polis*) that could simply dictate the values that the state or the wider culture should promote, although Oldham did believe that the church's political life should model right social relations. Nor was the church that practiced middle axioms merely responsible for speaking narrowly to those issues connected to its immediate witness, leaving the maintenance of social structures largely to the state. Fundamentally, the church for Oldham was a gathered community (*ekklesia*) that embodied through its worship and work the kingdom of God, and middle axioms provided the venue through which this Lordship was pursued in every social structure.

Oldham's middle axiom approach, then, was less about specific strategies and programs than it was about the creation of discursive communities that invited laypersons to join theologians and clerics in deliberating about the ecumenical church's mission in the world. Fundamentally, Oldham's middle axiom approach represented the decision to cultivate inclusive communities of reflection, collaboration, interest, and action so that the church remained faithful to its fundamental identity and witness as a community created by God's self-sending (*missio Dei*). As will become clear, this ecclesiological basis for Oldham's middle axioms makes them integral to the church's *ethos*, or vision and way of life, which helps them avoid criticisms that have arisen from the perspective of both ecumenical and Anglican social

⁴ See, for example, John Howard Yoder, *The Christian Witness to the State*, Institute of Mennonite Studies, no. 3 (Newton, Kan.: Faith and Life Press, 1963), 71–73.

ethics. Oldham's middle axiom approach also offers the possibility of developing a contemporary vision for social ethics that operates within a missional ecclesiology to promote justice, healing, and peace in a secular, pluralized, and globalized world.

Oldham's Middle Axioms

Oldham introduced middle axioms in *The Church and Its Function in Society* (1937), a preparatory volume for the 1937 Oxford Conference on "Church, Community, and State" sponsored by the Life and Work movement. If the church was to be salt and light in an increasingly secular, idolatrous, and murderous world, Oldham argued that it must develop an ecumenically based social ethics. Seeking to avoid untenable appeals to natural law as well as the naive idealism of the social gospel, Oldham argued that "the church and the world" exist in a dialectical relationship that reflect the eschatological tension inherent in the belief that the "rule of God" is real but unrealized. Following Temple and Reinhold Niebuhr, Oldham saw this tension played out in balancing the demands of love and justice, the willingness to engage in human activity and trust God's providential initiative, and the dual imperatives of law and gospel.⁵

But Oldham went beyond Temple and Niebuhr in viewing the church as the site in which these tensions were most authentically played out. The "church is the true center of social renewal, and it can become this" in "so far as it places itself unreservedly at God's disposal." For "as the ambassador and servant of its living, risen Lord, the church is the instrument of his rule, and is called to bear its witness throughout the world and in all spheres of life, including those of business and politics." This open stance of the church required receptiveness to what God commands at particular points in history as well as to how the church might "bring about transformations in the life of society."⁶

Although the church's dialectical relation to the "world" entailed that the two "will be opposed to each other," it also meant that the church must listen to criticisms and movements in the wider society, as these are sources of correction and revelation.⁷ "If religious belief

⁵ Oldham, *Church and Its Function in Society*, 138. For more on Temple's understanding of love and justice, see Suggate, *William Temple*, 187–203.

⁶ Oldham, *Church and Its Function in Society*, 138, 131, 143.

⁷ Oldham, *Church and Its Function in Society*, 132.

is to be kept free from one-sidedness and perversion it must have constant criticism from without," he argued. Further, God "is not absent from the world which he has created" and is "at work in the lives and understandings even of those who do not call upon his name." The division between "the church and the world" is not a division "between two sociological groups" but between opposing perspectives and loyalties concerning the nature of things. Therefore, despite evidence to the contrary, the world itself is a source of grace—the "universe is sacramental." Quoting Temple, Oldham argued: "It is only in this sacramental view of the universe 'that there is given hope of making human both politics and economics, and of making effectual both faith and love.'"⁸

As this sacramental vision indicates, Oldham believed that the church is primarily constituted through worship. The "church is by its nature a worshipping community, and its necessary function as an organized society is to provide opportunities for common and public worship and to educate its members in the spirit and practice of worship."⁹ So constituted, the church is the "realization of true community," for its worship provides the basis for a common love that is the source of peace and reconciliation between its members:

The church should be the place where barriers of race, nationality, class, sex and education are done away with, where the unprivileged, the downtrodden, the outcast and the despised, find a welcome and feel themselves at home; a meeting ground where those who are divided in questions of politics and economics can realize afresh their unity in loyalty to a common Lord, can discuss their differences in the reality of this fellowship and learn to understand one another. In the modern disintegration of social life the church ought to provide centers in which men [and women] can find protection, shelter and security in the care and love of their fellow men [and women], and rediscover the meaning of community in the support and friendship of a society the members of which bear one another's burdens and seek the good of all. The church ought also to be the place not only where support and encouragement are given those who need them, but where the more robust and vigorous may find their individualism and

⁸ Oldham, *Church and Its Function in Society*, 128–129. Quotation is from William Temple, *Nature, Man and God* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1953), 486.

⁹ Oldham, *Church and Its Function in Society*, 143.

self-will disciplined and tempered and their purposes purified and strengthened in a common endeavor to learn and to fulfill the will of Christ.¹⁰

To achieve this ecclesial vision internally required that the church develop and support the “growth of smaller groups who will seek to realize among themselves the relations of mutual trust and support and responsibility which are characteristic of the Christian society.”¹¹ In these smaller groups, more inclusive vehicles for worship, theological reflection, administration, evangelism, and outreach that involved greater lay participation must be explored.

Externally, the church must use its “prophetic and teaching office” to empower the witness and action of “Christian laity” by providing them with grounded direction for advancing the rule of God in the world. This direction does not properly take the form of sweeping statements, such as “Christians are bound to obey the law of love or to strive for social justice,” for these are “broad assertions” that do “not go far toward helping the individual” to know what to do “in particular cases.” On the other hand, church directives must not “rob” laypersons of their “moral responsibility” by giving “precise instructions to be literally carried out.” Therefore, between “purely general statements of the ethical demands of the gospel” and “the decisions that have to be made in concrete situations,” there is “need for what may be described as *middle axioms*” that are “provisional definitions of the type of behavior required for Christians at a given period and in given circumstances.”¹²

As a preparatory volume for a forthcoming ecumenical conference, Oldham refrained in *The Church and Its Function in Society* from offering specific middle axioms. Instead, he provided a framework for developing middle axioms. Because of his distrust of natural law, Oldham argued that middle axioms operated within an ethic that favored “obedience” over “ends.” This obedience takes the form a “collective judgment” that considers what “at a given period and in given circumstances” faithful living demanded. Living in an industrialized European nation on the verge of world war, this meant standing against certain “evils, such as the exaltation of the material over the

¹⁰ Oldham, *Church and Its Function in Society*, 148.

¹¹ Oldham, *Church and Its Function in Society*, 149.

¹² Oldham, *Church and Its Function in Society*, 193–194.

spiritual and the indifference to material injustice in capitalist societies, the demonry of nationalism, and the destruction of human values by dictatorships.”¹³ To resist these evils involved accepting the truths inherent in their companion ideologies of communism, capitalism, nationalism, and fascism as “secularized forms of the kingdom of God.” Therefore Christians “ought to be open to the needs which these movements are seeking to meet and the hopes which they inspire.” But all “knowledge derived from other sources, however valid within its own range,” must be evaluated in light of the Christian affirmation that “Christ is Lord” and measured against the pattern of the “incarnation, the cross and the resurrection.” The incarnation “gives to human life a dignity and value” that resists forces of dehumanization. The cross is a reminder that “God’s love is inexhaustible and that all his dealings with men [and women] are prompted by his love.” The resurrection is the source of “undying hope” and encourages Christians to be “fearless witnesses” of the truth that “human existence is revealed in Jesus Christ.” Christians therefore must embody Christ: if “Christ is no longer present in the flesh,” how can those “living today know of him and believe in him unless in some measure he is revealed in the lives of those who confess his name and in social institutions which are transformed by his Spirit?”¹⁴

The best example of Oldham’s middle axiom approach is found in a subsequent edited volume, *The Churches Survey Their Task* (1937), which compiled reports from the Oxford Conference sections on church and community, church and state, the economic order, education, and international relations. For our purposes, the report addressing the economic order bears close examination as a particularly fine example of the middle axiom approach.

The report begins by stating that the “Christian Church” approaches “problems of the social and economic order” from the standpoint of the “nature and will of God” revealed in the incarnation and the commandments to love God and neighbor. Such love mandates a commitment to human “dignity” that is based on the belief that humans are “made in the image of God,” but also on the revelation that human dignity has been restored by Jesus Christ. Human dignity, then, is not discovered simply by examining the nature of things, but falls under the category of revelation concerning human nature as

¹³ Oldham, *Church and Its Function in Society*, 221–222.

¹⁴ Oldham, *Church and Its Function in Society*, 228–230.

inherently good but sinful. Translated into the mode of justice, human dignity and neighbor-love are realized in the “harmonious relation of life to life,” but they are impeded by “the sinful tendency of one life to take advantage of another.” Justice therefore is established “by defining the rightful place” each “life must have in the harmony of the whole and by assigning the duty of each to each.” Justice does not demand, however, complete “self *sacrifice*,” but the “good” that “each member of the community may rightfully claim.”¹⁵

The report then turns to consider “present economic” conditions. Noting that there was “no one economic order,” the report nonetheless chose to consider the “capitalist economic system” in depth and to treat communism and socialism as “protest movements” against the “evil results of the capitalist economic order.” Capitalism arose as a product of the “emancipation of the individual” during the Enlightenment and has created increasing levels of material well-being. By enabling “industrial development” and encouraging “technological development,” the “system of free enterprise” had raised the “general standard of consumption” and “reduced the physical labor” of “manual workers.” Further, capitalism was the driving force of what is now called globalization: “For the first time in history it has brought all the parts of the world into interdependence with each other and has made the idea of the unity of mankind a fact of common experience.”¹⁶

But capitalism had serious downsides. Although its first architects had argued that “this new economic order” would bring “social justice,” the “same forces which had produced material progress have often enhanced inequalities, created insecurity, and subjected all members of modern society to the domination of so-called independent economic ‘laws.’” In the process of industrialization, traditional societies have been destroyed, wealth has become concentrated in the hands of a privileged few, large numbers have been impoverished and forced into urban slums, employment has become sporadic, and labor has lost its sense of vocation. As a result, “hostility” has arisen between different classes with regard to “their economic relationships.” In the developed nations of Europe and America, this hostility had fueled reform movements by trade unions in the nineteenth

¹⁵ *The Churches Survey Their Task: The Report of the Conference at Oxford, July 1937, on Church, Community, and State*, ed. J. H. Oldham (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1937), 92–93.

¹⁶ *Churches Survey Their Task*, 97–98, 102.

century as well as nationalizing efforts by the state to control capitalism's excesses and minimize its negativities. However, these movements have failed to contain the social diseases of capitalism, which have spread to "undeveloped countries" in the rest of the world, making them victims of "economic exploitation."¹⁷

Given this state of affairs, the report called on all "Christian churches" to "repent of their blindness to the actual situation." Churches needed to acknowledge that capitalism eroded human dignity: by encouraging "acquisitiveness" and a "false standard of economic and social success"; by creating "indefensible inequalities of opportunity in regard to education, leisure, and health"; by enabling "centers of economic power" that are "not responsible to any organ of the community"; and by eroding in many workers a "sense of Christian vocation in their daily life." At the same time, the report acknowledged that persons of good will disagreed on the best way forward programmatically, whether through "private enterprise," institutions of "social ownership," or redistribution through taxation.¹⁸

These disagreements, however, did not absolve the church from acting. The report recommended that the churches develop "long-range goals, standards, and principles in the light of which every concrete situation, and every proposal for improving it, must be tested" by the "searchlight" of the gospel.¹⁹ More importantly, "immediate action" was necessary. The church must reform its own "institutional life" regarding its "sources of income," fundraising, "administration of property," and "terms of employment" so that it avoided "the evils that Christians deplore in secular society." The church must develop regional and ecumenical centers for "study and research, as well as for witness and action in appropriate circumstances." The church must equip workers with the skill of integrating their "work and worship," so that men and women learn "to ask forgiveness, to make petitions and to give thanks for the things with which they are chiefly concerned day by day." The church must work with "national and local government" and "co-operative movements" to enlarge its opportunities "for social action." Finally, the church

¹⁷ *Churches Survey Their Task*, 99, 101.

¹⁸ *Churches Survey Their Task*, 102, 88, 104–109, 110–113.

¹⁹ *Churches Survey Their Task*, 90.

must encourage “group experiments” that can embody alternative patterns of more faithful economic living.²⁰

Oldham’s middle axiom approach, then, involved more than merely provisional objectives that bridged the gap between general claims and precise commands that every individual Christian must follow. Rather, the middle axiom approach represented a multifaceted attempt to explore the concrete implications of the normative commitments of the Christian faith regarding the love and justice required to protect human dignity and flourishing. As evident in the case regarding the economic order, this attempt involved the incorporation of the insights of social scientists, but not without subjecting these insights to the normative commitments that guided such an enquiry. The middle axiom approach also involved appreciating the way that the insights from social scientists, as well as the social structures studied, were subject to differing opinions and debate. These disagreements conditioned the responses offered, which allowed for latitude and multiple strategies for social transformation. But it did not absolve Christians from their responsibilities to enter the public sphere and work for social justice. Finally, for Oldham, middle axioms define collective activities that the “church,” rather than individuals, pursues in community. The church’s social engagement in the public sphere is an extension of its corporate worship and part of its own witness and renewal.

The Missional Ecclesiology of Oldham’s Middle Axioms

As this review makes clear, Oldham’s middle axiom approach gave the reports from the Oxford Conference an uncommon level of breadth, depth, and insight.²¹ However, among the immediate generation that followed Oldham, there were competing views of what precisely defined the middle axiom approach. W. A. Visser ’t Hooft, who authored the first half of *The Church and Its Function in Society*, summarized the middle axiom “method” this way: (1) “to discover the men and women who can best help the churches understand the nature of the crisis of society”; (2) “to arrive” at a “definition of the fundamental issues with which the churches should be concerned

²⁰ *Churches Survey Their Task*, 126, 127–129.

²¹ For a review of the other reports, see John C. Bennett, “Breakthrough in Ecumenical Social Ethics: The Legacy of the Oxford Conference on Church, Community, and State (1937),” *Ecumenical Review* 40, no. 2 (April 1988): 132–146.

in order to render their witness to society"; (3) "to promote an interdisciplinary approach to these issues and particularly a dialogue between theologians and lay people"; and (4) "to present the results to the churches for study and appropriate action."²² Ronald Preston argued that the middle axiom approach mediates between "the total Christian understanding of life and an analysis of an empirical situation"²³ and avoids "utopian" appeals "to an ideal social and political order which bore no relation to the parameters of immediate and necessary decisions."²⁴ For Paul Abrecht, middle axioms "outline or approximate ethical positions" that reflect "the encounter of faith with social issues."²⁵ Finally, for John Bennett, middle axioms are concrete "goals," such as the "responsibility to maintain full employment" or the prevention of "private centers of economic power from becoming stronger than the government," that operate under the following eschatological proviso: "The Kingdom of God in its fullness lies beyond our best achievements in the world but God does have purposes for us that can be realized."²⁶

Each of these definitions has some purchase on Oldham's view. However, each neglects the centrality of the church as the community out of which middle axioms are properly generated. Therefore, each overlooks the fact that Oldham's middle axiom approach is not merely a strategy for translating Christian imperatives into proximate goals but the performance of an ecclesiology that saw the church operating in the world through many members. Middle axioms originally developed from Oldham's recognition that the church's imperative to act against injustice was part of its call to live according to the Lordship of Christ and the kingdom of God. Therefore, the proposals generated through engagement with pressing issues of social concern would be part of the church's own theological self-understanding and spiritual revitalization. This is evident in Oldham's conviction that the church

²² W. A. Visser 't Hooft, "Oldham's Method in Abrecht's Hands," *Ecumenical Review* 37, no. 1 (1985): 3–9, 4.

²³ Ronald Preston, "Middle Axioms in Christian Social Ethics," in *Explorations in Theology* 9 (London: SCM Press, 1981), 39–40.

²⁴ Ronald Preston, *Confusions in Christian Social Ethics: Problems for Geneva and Rome* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1994), 19.

²⁵ Paul Abrecht, "The Evolution of Ecumenical Social Thought: Some Personal Reflections," in *Faith and Faithfulness, Essays on Contemporary Ecumenical Themes: A Tribute to Philip A. Potter* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1984), 107.

²⁶ John C. Bennett, *Christian Ethics and Social Policy* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1946), 77, 81.

must engage the world for the sake of its own actualization and renewal. In this way, Oldham argued, the church would be “continually reborn as the living church within the church as an organized society.”²⁷

Commentators have often overlooked the ecclesiology that framed Oldham’s middle axiom approach, arguing that because his goal was to concentrate on the Life and Work aspect of the ecumenical movement, Oldham developed a “functional” ecclesiology that avoided statements on the ontological “nature” of the church. As a result, Oldham’s ecclesiology represented merely the inversion of the totalitarian regimes and idolatrous societies against which the ecumenical movement struggled at that time.²⁸ These assessments are true to the extent that specific discussions of biblical interpretation, doctrines, sacramental theology, orders, polity, and other internal structures did not occupy the foreground of the documents and discussions of the Oxford Conference, as these fell under the special purview of the Faith and Order movement.

But it is misleading to portray the framing ecclesiology of Oldham’s middle axioms as entirely determined by external political realities or as a merely functional account of the church and the world. For Oldham, the church’s being was related to the church becoming what it had been called to be by God: Oldham’s ecclesiology is neither functional nor ontological, but an early form of what became known as “missional,” that is, its starting point is God’s own self-sending (*missio Dei*) for the sake of the world. Within this ecclesiology, mission is not, as David Bosch writes, “primarily an activity of the church, but an attribute of God.”²⁹ Consequently, participating in God’s mission and embodying the kingdom of God is central to the church’s identity, but neither is to be strictly identified with the visible church. Rather, as Darrell Guder writes, the church is the community called by God and empowered by the Spirit to bear “witness” and to make “tangible” the “reality of the kingdom.” It is “not that the church is the kingdom, but

²⁷ Oldham, *Church and Its Function in Society*, 149.

²⁸ See Konrad Raiser, *Ecumenism in Transition: A Paradigm Shift in the Ecumenical Movement* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1991), 44; Nils Ehrenström, “Movements for International Friendship and Life and Work, 1925–1948,” in *A History of the Ecumenical Movement*, ed. R. Rouse and S. C. Neill (London: SPCK, 1954), 587–596.

²⁹ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991), 390. Bosch’s treatment of Oldham is misleading; see *Transforming Mission*, 324.

that the church demonstrates the nearness of the kingdom, the first fruits of its coming.”³⁰

Oldham recognized that the social issues the church faced in the 1930s required moral and theological reformation. The church’s ineffectiveness represented a betrayal of its mission and vocation as a political community. Oldham lamented that “in the midst” of the “conflict and chaos” of the late 1930s the church stood “divided, perplexed and relatively ineffective.” Further, he lamented that the “more clearly we see what needs to be done, the more deeply are we conscious of the present spiritual poverty.” Therefore, the “call to the church is to take its part in the creation of a new world.” To answer this call would require more than “mere attempts to revive or maintain traditional moral ideas” and the “forms inherited from a former age.”³¹ Rather, it would come through the development of a new catholic and ecumenical vision for the church. Developed at the beginning of the ecumenical movement, before significant unifying structures and agreements were attempted or developed, this catholic vision was grounded in the realization that unity would develop through concerted efforts of social reform that would reveal the way forward with growing clarity to participating churches.

The societal crises in the 1930s therefore presented an opportunity for the ecumenical community to rethink the nature of the church’s worship, witness, and work from the perspective of mission.³² Such a reexamination was risky, but Oldham believed that a church that “would fulfill its mission in the world today must be one which is prepared to take large risks or allow its members to take large risks.” One of these large risks was to recognize that the church’s model for political engagement could neither be that of Christendom nor of two kingdoms. With regard to Christendom, its time was past, and “no one today desires that the church, as an ecclesiastical organization, should assume the direction of political or economic life.”³³ With regard to two kingdoms, this had devolved to the doctrine that “social and political life is a sphere outside of the competence of the church,” with

³⁰ Darrell Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2000), 66–67.

³¹ Oldham, *Church and Its Function in Society*, 218–219.

³² See Graeme Smith, *Oxford 1937: The Universal Christian Council for Life and Work Conference* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004). Smith’s account of the Christendom model at the Oxford Conference is mistaken.

³³ Oldham, *Church and Its Function in Society*, 201.

the result that the church sinks “to the level of being nothing more than an instrument of national policy.”³⁴

But if these models were inadequate, Oldham admitted that no new model presented itself. Such theoretical poverty, however, could be as much gift as burden, for it opened the way for ad hoc engagements between the church and society on various levels. Politically, the “right course for a Christian individual or assembly to take in a particular instance cannot be determined in advance by any abstract rule but must be an act of obedience to God in the face of the concrete situation.”³⁵ Nonetheless, the one constant at every level should be the centrality of worship, which was a political activity: “The church is a worshipping community in whose worship every relative political judgment is brought to the searching test and scrutiny of an absolute divine judgment,” Oldham argued. Therefore the church “unites” people “in a loyalty which transcends the relativities of political action.”³⁶ As a political community, the church does not represent an ideal society—a *polis*—that can simply dictate principles that should be the measure of all other political organizations. Rather, the church is a worshipping assembly—an *ekklesia*—dedicated to making the kingdom of God known in the world.³⁷

Properly understood, “worship is adoration issuing in action, and the unity of adoration and action transforms life into a sacrament.” In this way, “a worshipping community dedicated to the fulfillment of God’s purpose becomes the means through which God’s purpose may be realized in the world in all the relationships of human life.”³⁸ This sacramental vision of worship and political engagement grounded the church’s catholic and ecumenical identity, and here Oldham agreed with Barth that “every single Christian community is as such an ecumenical (catholic) fellowship, that is, at one with the Christian communities in all other places, regions and lands.”³⁹

³⁴ Oldham, *Church and Its Function in Society*, 124–125.

³⁵ Oldham, *Church and Its Function in Society*, 201–202.

³⁶ Oldham, *Church and Its Function in Society*, 202.

³⁷ Here I draw from Bernd Wannewetsch, “Liturgy,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, ed. Peter Scott and William T. Cavanaugh (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 76–90.

³⁸ Oldham, *Church and Its Function in Society*, 144–145.

³⁹ Karl Barth, “Christian Community and Civil Community,” in *Community, State, and Church: Three Essays* (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1968), 150.

Oldham's middle axiom approach profoundly influenced Anglican social ethics and the ethics of the ecumenical movement. Within the ecumenical movement, the emergent World Council of Churches (WCC), established in 1948, followed the middle axiom approach guided by the mandate to create a "responsible society" where "those who hold political authority or economic power are responsible for its exercise to God and to those people whose welfare is affected by it."⁴⁰ Within Anglican social ethics, the middle axiom approach helped guide the creation of the welfare state in Britain and led to the establishment of ecclesiastical boards and select committees that published reports on social issues, such as bioethics, the family, and nuclear war.⁴¹ However, in both contemporary Anglican and ecumenical social ethics, significant criticisms have arisen that a retrieval of Oldham's approach would have to answer if not allay.

Middle Axioms and Contemporary Ecumenism

Within the ecumenical movement, middle axioms were eventually discontinued. The presenting reason concerned social location: the early ecumenical movement operated from a predominately privileged, male, Western, European, and mainline Protestant perspective, and the middle axiom approach largely reflected the access and status that this accrued social capital could purchase. Consequently, despite their desire to promote social justice, the Oxford Conference had little actual engagement with those "others" they hoped to welcome to the renewed ecumenical church. Oldham's analysis and the Oxford Conference therefore operated with a limited constituency that did not reflect the diversity of persons and cultures in the worldwide church. To counter this tendency, contemporary WCC organizational bodies have worked to incorporate voices that are more reflective of the membership of churches worldwide, particularly those representing the world's poor, oppressed, and marginalized.⁴² With this expanded constituency came a different strategy of social transformation inspired by liberation theology, which eschewed

⁴⁰ Ronald H. Preston, *Church and Society in the Late Twentieth Century: The Economic and Political Task* (London: SCM Press, 1983), 83.

⁴¹ Brown, "Politics as the Church's Business," 179–182; Suggate, *William Temple*, 148–151.

⁴² Bennett, "Breakthrough in Ecumenical Social Ethics," 132–134.

incremental approaches such as middle axioms in favor of solidarity with the powerless and radical calls for witness and social change.⁴³

In addition to setting aside middle axioms as an overly privileged strategy for social transformation, another criticism within the ecumenical movement concerned the adequacy of Oldham's ecclesiology. Oldham's vision of "church" presumed too much unanimity—a "Christocentric universalism" that proclaimed the "confession of Jesus Christ," the "unity of his people," and "the call to witness and service to the whole of humankind."⁴⁴ Such a view failed to reflect the complexity of the world *oikoumene* that emerged after the Oxford Conference. Thus Konrad Raiser argues: "When we say 'oikoumene,' we are not referring to a global abstraction, such as 'one world,' the 'whole human race,' or 'one united world church,'" but to actual "connections and relationships between churches, between cultures, between people and human societies in their infinite variety, and between the world of humankind and creation as a whole."⁴⁵ In this enlarged ecclesiology, the church is no longer the primary instrument of God's saving mission, but one community among many in God's *oikoumene*, which creates the possibility for a "wider ecumenism" that can include interfaith relations.⁴⁶

Whether these developments of the WCC's ecclesiology and ethics have enriched or impoverished worldwide ecumenism cannot be resolved here.⁴⁷ But it is clear that they have problems of their own. Writing fifty years after the Oxford Conference, Paul Abrecht remarked that, having abandoned middle axioms, "the ecumenical movement seems more deeply divided and polarized than ever about the theological-ethical basis of ecumenical thought and action."⁴⁸ In the twenty years since Abrecht rendered this verdict, little has changed to suggest otherwise.

⁴³ Duncan B. Forrester, "The Scope of Public Theology," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 17, no. 2 (2004): 10–16.

⁴⁴ Raiser, *Ecumenism in Transition*, 37.

⁴⁵ Raiser, *Ecumenism in Transition*, 86.

⁴⁶ S. Wesley Ariarajah, "Wider Ecumenism: A Threat or a Promise?" *The Ecumenical Review* 50 (July 1998): 328.

⁴⁷ See Michael Kinnamon, *The Vision of the Ecumenical Movement and How It Has Been Impoverished by Its Friends* (St. Louis, Mo.: Chalice Press, 2003).

⁴⁸ Paul Abrecht, "From Oxford to Vancouver: Lessons from Fifty Years of Ecumenical Work for Economic and Social Justice," *Ecumenical Review* 40, no. 2 (April 1988): 166.

Indeed, in terms of social transformation, Oldham's middle axioms were more effective than the strategies employed by the contemporary WCC. For example, although the specific proposals from the Oxford Conference went largely unheeded on account of the Second World War, Oldham's approach informed efforts by the Federal Council of Churches in the United States to advocate—in regular consultation with the then-emerging WCC—for the founding of the United Nations (1945) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948).⁴⁹ In contrast, despite numerous conferences and reports over the past thirty years, proposals from the contemporary WCC for social transformation have had little impact. This ineffectiveness is particularly evident with regard to economic issues. In a paper presented in 2007 at an AGAPE (Alternative Globalization Addressing Peoples and Earth) consultation in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, Rogate Mshana surveyed recent WCC reports on economic justice that committed member churches to “embrace a spirituality of radical sharing of resources in order to do justice to the poor.” Lamenting that these commitments have “remained on paper,” Mshana argues for a “greed line” that could provide a point from which to pay economic “reparations” to developing countries.⁵⁰ But if this proposal expresses the outrage felt by those who find global inequalities repugnant, it is unlikely to change global economic structures. A more effective, if incremental, approach would resemble the strategies for internal reform of global capitalism outlined above in *The Churches Survey Their Task*.

Consequently, even if Oldham's middle axiom approach as originally developed merited the criticisms mentioned above, there are resources within it for accommodating them. With regard to social location, Oldham's middle axiom approach was not intended to merely state policies or programs but to encourage the church to adopt a differentiated strategy of engagement within the public sphere in projects that included grassroots experiments. To draw from John

⁴⁹ See John Nurser, *For All Peoples and All Nations: The Ecumenical Church and Human Rights* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2005).

⁵⁰ R. Mshana, “Poverty, Wealth and Ecology: The Impact of Economic Globalization—A Background to the Study Process,” AGAPE consultation, November 5–9, 2007, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania; available at <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/public-witness-addressing-power-affirming-peace/poverty-wealth-and-ecology/neoliberal-paradigm/10-07-the-study-process-on-poverty-wealth-and-ecological-debt.html>.

Atherton, a retrieved account of Oldham's middle axioms would emphasize approaches that are "contextually located," "praxis-oriented," and grounded in local identities and traditions. All of these values express a "bias of inclusivity" that lies at the heart of Oldham's ecumenism.⁵¹ For this reason, the South African theologian Charles Villa-Vicencio argues that middle axioms provide the best means for the church to work for structural transformation in contexts of marginalization and oppression: "The early proponents of middle axioms," such as Oldham, "were by implication beginning to reach in the direction of a contextual ethic—formed by the Christian heritage, but also the prevailing social context." Therefore, "if the church is to share creatively in the reconstruction process it is obliged to translate this heritage into concrete proposals" following the middle axiom approach.⁵²

With regard to the false sense of unity created by Oldham's use of the term "church," it is clear that Oldham considered this term primarily normative and aspirational rather than merely descriptive. Writing at a time in which there was little formal unity among churches participating in the early ecumenical movement, Oldham's vision for the ecumenical church was an imaginative construct to envision the possibilities that might open if the churches were to work to achieve the unity Christ intended. Therefore, instead of operating with a vision that was abstract and overly simplistic, Oldham viewed the church as an emerging catholic community that would develop over time, with concerted effort. What would remain nonnegotiable for Oldham's ecclesiology, however, is its conviction that unity would come through the common worship of the Triune God and work on behalf of the kingdom. This specificity might foster, rather than impede, the creation of ecumenical relations, particularly in projects of social transformation.⁵³

Middle Axioms and Anglican Social Ethics

The middle axiom approach encountered similar concerns regarding social location within Anglicanism. In Britain, particularly

⁵¹ John Atherton, "Marginalization, Manchester and the Scope of Public Theology," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 17, no. 2 (2004): 27–28.

⁵² Charles Villa-Vicencio, *A Theology of Reconstruction: Nation-building and Human Rights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 283.

⁵³ See Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

through the Church of England's Board of Social Responsibility, middle axioms came to be understood as the formation of interdisciplinary groups that published recommendations for national policies and programs. In these forums, a dialogical process was employed that solicited the expertise non-theologians brought to bear on a given topic in order to survey the social context of a particular issue before turning to the theological doctrines at stake. So configured, many have argued that middle axioms favored a detached and paternalistic approach to social issues that parsed them in vague terms so that those with specific expertise could remain free to use their best judgment. Thus Mark Chapman argues that there was a "latent tendency" for "loose language" in the middle axiom approach that privileged "managerialism" and created the "cult of the expert" that left little room for moral and theological critique.⁵⁴

Although Malcolm Brown believes that "middle axiom-forming dialogues" could include "marginalized" groups and "diverse ways of reasoning," related to the concern for social location are three criticisms regarding their theological adequacy.⁵⁵ At the root of them is the fear that in pursuing middle axioms, the church has lost sight of the distinctive claims the Christian dogmatic tradition makes on human flourishing and sociality.⁵⁶ Duncan Forrester therefore argues that middle axioms provide a "public theology" that offers "constructive insights" to help build "a decent society" but cannot preach "conversion" and "repentance" prophetically.⁵⁷

Another criticism concerns the hermeneutic implied in the middle axiom approach. When incorporating insights from the social sciences, say economics, the middle axiom approach accepts views within these fields as empirical "givens." Consequently, middle axioms lack what Michael Northcott calls a "deep ontological critique" of the cultural evolution of economic structures and how these "rest upon an attack on transcendence and the rejection of the Christian account of God as Trinity." Middle axioms therefore fail to recognize how economic theory and practices shape us in ways that are "fundamentally inimical to the Christian project," as well as the resources

⁵⁴ Mark D. Chapman, "Ronald Preston, William Temple, and the Future of Christian Politics," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 17, no. 2 (2004): 171.

⁵⁵ Brown, "Politics as the Church's Business," 180.

⁵⁶ See Michael Banner, *Christian Ethics and Contemporary Moral Problems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

⁵⁷ Forrester, "The Scope of Public Theology," 6.

within the Christian tradition for creating an alternative vision of identity and desire.⁵⁸

A third concerns the church as a tradition-dependent community of formation. The middle axiom approach contributes to a buffered relationship between the church and the wider society. The formative traditions, performative politics, and practices of the church had no role to play in the public sphere except as mediated by individual Christians—predominantly laypersons—negotiating the complex terrain of contemporary life on their own.⁵⁹

In taking up these criticisms, it is important to note that they stem primarily from what the middle axiom approach became through the influence of Temple and Preston. For Temple, middle axioms were framed by a theology that emphasized creation, original sin, and natural law, through which he respectively emphasized the significance of the material world, the need to have a realistic view of human capabilities, and the possibility for moral agreement. This framework helped Temple to develop freedom, social fellowship, and service as derivative principles and, in turn, to formulate middle axioms that justified the creation of the welfare state, the goals of which were stated at the conclusion of *Christianity and Social Order*: (1) affordable housing, (2) public education, (3) minimum wages, (4) employee representation, (5) adequate leisure, and (6) the liberties of speech, assembly, and association.⁶⁰ Although Temple did not leave ecclesiology uncovered, it was not central. Temple explored the topic in *Christianity and Social Order* primarily to justify the right of the church to “interfere” on matters of public policy. But the church’s work of social transformation in the public sphere would be through

⁵⁸ Michael Northcott, “The Market, the Multitude, and Metaphysics: Ronald Preston’s Middle Way and the Theological Critique of Economic Reason,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 17, no. 2 (2004): 110–111.

⁵⁹ See Northcott, “The Market, the Multitude, and Metaphysics,” 106–108; Wendy Dackson, “But Was It Meant to be a Joke Legacy? Ronald Preston as Heir to William Temple,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 17, no. 2 (2004): 149–157; Malcolm Brown, “Politics as the Church’s Business,” 174–175; Malcolm Brown, “You Take Alasdair MacIntyre Much Too Seriously” (Ronald Preston)—But Do Preston or MacIntyre Take the Global Economy Seriously Enough?” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 17, no. 2 (2004): 173–180.

⁶⁰ William Temple, *Christianity and Social Order* (London: Shephard-Walwyn, 1976), 96–97. For more on Temple’s role in the creation of the welfare state, see Asa Briggs, “The Welfare State in Historical Perspective,” in *The Welfare State: A Reader*, ed. Christopher Pierson and Francis G. Castles (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2000), 18–31.

laypersons fulfilling their individual callings.⁶¹ Further, in formulating middle axioms, the church must respect the autonomy of “technique” that laypersons with expertise brought to an issue under consideration to ensure that the proposals generated would be realistic and achievable.⁶²

Preston followed Temple’s approach to middle axioms, but he also created space for a fuller account of the doctrines that guided the middle axiom approach and the church’s role in the public sphere. Although he favored the doctrines Temple highlighted, Preston believed that “every major Christian doctrine” affects how the gospel is to be proclaimed in the public sphere. Therefore how doctrines “are to be understood and expressed is constantly being re-examined as the Christian community is called to scrutinize its inheritance from the past in light of its experiences in the present.” Preston also provided a fuller account of the church: The church transformed social relations and formed Christian character through its worship, which created a “new community” transcending “all the barriers human beings erect against one another—personal, economic and political.” Further, he believed that the church, and not just individual Christians, could enter the public sphere and make particular recommendations arrived at through the middle axiom approach. Finally, Preston tried to expand what would qualify as a middle axiom approach beyond what Temple envisioned so that it would include a wide range of voices and address a range of social issues. Historically, middle axioms had been used to develop broad proposals, but Preston believed that they could reflect “whatever general goals the Christian church may wish to forward,” including those of “witness or solidarity.”⁶³

At the same time, Preston’s paradigm of the middle axiom approach was of a study group composed of credentialed persons mandated to explore a divisive issue and to move from general principles, to proximate and provisional practices, and finally to concrete proposals for specific localities. The specific proposals generated would be an exercise in practical judgment that was contextually specific and empirically grounded in the shared sense of “what is going on.” Preston

⁶¹ Temple, *Christianity and Social Order*, 39. For more on Temple’s ecclesiology, see Wendy Dackson, *The Ecclesiology of Archbishop William Temple (1881–1944)* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 2004).

⁶² Temple, *Christianity and Social Order*, 30, 58.

⁶³ Preston, *Church and Society in the Late Twentieth Century*, 118–119, 142.

allowed that such study groups continued to grant special authority to experts, but he believed that, in the final analysis, if a group lacked such persons, “foolish things are likely to be done with the best intentions.”⁶⁴

Therefore, in contending with the criticisms noted above, it is necessary to differentiate Oldham’s vision for middle axioms from that of Temple and Preston. Defenders of middle axioms within Anglican social ethics have typically viewed the middle axiom approach as a tradition of enquiry that was internally coherent and seamlessly extended from Oldham to Temple and Preston, among others. But if there are similarities between these respective accounts, there are differences that require distinct engagements with these criticisms to argue the viability of middle axioms. To defend Temple’s account would require justifying the doctrines he foregrounds, in particular natural law and the teleology ascribed to it, as well as his buffered view of the church’s involvement in the public sphere.⁶⁵ To defend Preston’s account would require showing how his paradigmatic understanding of middle axioms do not foreclose the doctrinal and ecclesial modifications he proposed.⁶⁶

Oldham’s middle axiom approach, however, engages the above criticisms differently. With regard to social location, as noted above, Oldham’s approach has resources within it to offer a differentiated strategy of engagement with the public sphere that is contextually located, praxis-oriented, and grounded in local identities and traditions. More importantly, the missional ecclesiology that framed Oldham’s middle axiom approach also helps avoid some of the sharper edges of the other criticisms. With regard to the criticism that middle axioms obscure the distinctiveness of the Christian dogmatic tradition, in particular prophetic calls for conversion and repentance, Oldham’s approach was predicated on the belief that a renewed proclamation of the catholic and ecumenical vision of the church was pivotal to all social renewal. Therefore, Oldham’s middle axiom approach was inspired by a doctrinally specific reform movement that hoped to create an ecumenical church that could present an alternative *ethos*, or

⁶⁴ Preston, *Church and Society in the Late Twentieth Century*, 150, 152.

⁶⁵ See Temple, *Christianity and Social Order*, 80; Brown, “Politics as the Church’s Business,” 178–179.

⁶⁶ See Chapman, “Ronald Preston, William Temple, and the Future of Christian Politics,” 162–164.

vision and way of life, to that generated by fascist states and emerging global capitalism.

With regard to the criticism that the middle axiom approach cannot sustain a deep ontological critique of economic structures and is too accommodating of the insights of other social sciences, such a critique was central to Oldham's approach, particularly in the economic sphere. As noted above, the normative commitments to human dignity and flourishing enabled him to address the roots of the diseases affecting contemporary life concerned ontology: "the exaltation of the material over the spiritual" as well as the "indifference to material injustice," among others.⁶⁷ Therefore, if the economic report of *The Churches Survey Their Task* did not reject all economic structures outright, it certainly displayed an awareness of how economic structures erode human dignity, warp human desires, undermine community, and create unfettered corporations prone to exploiting the world's poor. However, meaningful change was possible, provided the church became willing to acknowledge its complicity in these structures and repentantly work to model a more humane economy.

Finally, with regard to the criticism that the middle axiom creates a buffered relationship between the church and the wider society, the whole purpose of Oldham's missional ecclesiology was to find ways to create a porous relationship between the church and wider social structures. Although Oldham saw the middle axiom approach providing better guidance as to what was required in a given context and circumstances, his account largely concerns how the church as a collective can foster social change through its many communities. Indeed, particularly when compared with Temple and Preston, what is most striking about Oldham's middle axioms is the extent to which the life and work of the church, rather than individual decisions and actions, occupy the foreground of his account. Middle axioms, for Oldham, represented a way for the church to bring into view wider social structures in order to subject them to an interdisciplinary critique that drew from the best insights of theology, philosophy, and social science. As the report on the economic order indicated, they could take the form not only of long-range goals, standards, and principles—similar to what Temple proposed in *Christianity and Social Order*—but they also prescribed internal audits of the church's

⁶⁷ Oldham, *Church and Its Function in Society*, 221–222.

economic policies as well as the creation of better opportunities for concrete witness.

Oldham's Middle Axioms and Contemporary Social Ethics

That Oldham's middle axiom approach accommodates the criticisms discussed above, however, does not mean that it can be retrieved without revision in contemporary Anglican social ethics. For the criticisms noted do not merely identify perceived shortcomings in the middle axiom approach, but they also indicate the ways that the terrain for theological and ethical reflection has shifted over the past twenty years. In closing, then, there are three modifications that such a project of retrieval would require. The first would be to develop the multiple ways Christian doctrines enrich the connection between a missional ecclesiology and the middle axiom approach. Although compelling, underlying Oldham's vision of the dialectical relationship between the church and the world are even more complex connections between doctrines and social structures than he could reasonably cover. Future work that aims to follow Oldham would examine other ways that Christian doctrines have shaped, and been shaped by, their cultural and social context. In this way, the different forms of witness by a missional church—whether through working for incremental reform or standing in radical solidarity—can find deeper resources for reflection and action.⁶⁸

A second modification concerns the hermeneutic that a retrieval of Oldham's middle axiom approach would employ. Oldham's approach admirably employed a hermeneutics of welcome regarding insights from other fields to discern the demands of the gospel in a particular context. But it also needs a more developed hermeneutics of suspicion that can interrogate these insights as well. As noted above, Oldham trusted the ability for Christians to engage in a "collective judgment" regarding the implications of the kingdom of God in a given context. This trust is not misplaced, but it needs to be refined somewhat to appreciate how culturally conditioned such judgments can be. For example, to return to the topic of economics, the normative ground and proposals generated in the report on the economic order have significant overlap with contemporary attempts in developmental

⁶⁸ For an example, notwithstanding his own understanding of middle axioms, see Christopher Marshall, *Beyond Retribution: A New Testament Vision for Justice, Crime, and Punishment* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2001).

economics to argue for a capabilities approach to international development.⁶⁹ However, these normative positions need to ask if they rely on a wider ideology of the “myth of development” that must be considered in a theological treatment of economic structures.⁷⁰ Developing this hermeneutics of suspicion involves more than merely enlarging the hermeneutical circle in order to incorporate voices that have been historically excluded—a well-known strategy that has been employed to counter limitations of social location. It also involves developing a level of critique that examines the way ideology can shape not only fundamental theological concepts but also our basic ethical intuitions.

Finally, given the missional ecclesiology that framed Oldham’s middle axiom approach and the many forms they could take to advance the differentiated mission of the church, one challenge would be to explore what is at stake in the term “middle axioms.” As Dennis McCann rightly notes, the middle axiom approach is often mistaken for a deductive method of moving logically from principles to actions, rather than as an inductive and contextually-based method for “holistic” reflection on the “signs of the time.” Drawing from James Gustafson, McCann argues that middle axioms are better described as “anchors” and “compasses” that the church uses for successful navigation.⁷¹ These metaphors are evocative and stem from a long-standing image of the church as a ship. But, from Oldham’s perspective, they are misleading. For Oldham, the middle axiom approach did not merely prevent the church from drifting or tell it where it should go. Rather, it enabled the church to rediscover its missional identity so that it might be renewed. As Oldham’s approach indicates, in contemporary social ethics this renewal would involve not only a redefinition of the term “middle axioms,” but also of the “church” that turns to them to participate more fully as a reconciling people dedicated to working on behalf of God’s healing mission for the world.

⁶⁹ See, for example, Martha Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

⁷⁰ See Vincent Tucker, “The Myth of Development: A Critique of Eurocentric Discourse,” in *Critical Development Theory: Contributions to a New Paradigm*, ed. Ronaldo Munck and Denis O’Hearn (London: Zed, 1999), 1–26.

⁷¹ Dennis P. McCann, “A Second Look at Middle Axioms,” *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* (1981): 86.

Evolutionary-Emergent Worldview and Anglican Theological Revision: Case Studies from the 1920s

W. MARK RICHARDSON*

This essay explores the theological work of Anglicans in the 1920s in response to the changes in intellectual culture brought about by “emergence” interpretations of evolutionary theory. Exploring the theologies of prominent Modernists and liberal Anglo-Catholics, specifically regarding anthropology and soteriology, the author concludes that on the criterion of internal consistency the Modernists were more successful. The author contends that one cannot fully appreciate the differences between Modernists and liberal Anglo-Catholics on matters of doctrine without accounting for the interplay of doctrine with aspects of worldview and metaphysics that mediate the expression of doctrine.

“The traditional Christian dogma of original sin, its consequences and the mode of its transmission, as shaped in the West by St. Augustine, has always seemed to me . . . manifestly the most vulnerable part of the whole Christian account of the relations of God and man, and to call more imperatively than any other part of the theological system for reconstruction in light of philosophy and history.”

—A. E. Taylor, *The Faith of a Moralist*¹

Introduction

Today we are used to thinking of human beings building genetically on millions of years of life, and life itself building on emergent

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¹ A. E. Taylor, *The Faith of a Moralist* (London: Macmillan, 1930), 165.