

*Prelude:  
Toward a Politics of Relationality*

Let justice roll down like waters and  
righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

—Amos 5:24

Existence in most instances  
is sustained by a perilously slight  
margin of sensitivity.

—Bernard E. Meland<sup>1</sup>

ON THE VERGE OF A NEW CENTURY:  
A QUESTION OF OUR FUTURE

We are at this moment on the verge of a new century. In one sense, the timing—passing from the twentieth to the twenty-first century—is but an arbitrary point of measurement, a convenience designed to measure the passage of years. But, in a more profound sense, the timing is fraught with deep significance.

In our move into the new century, we are confronted with a massive decision about the character and quality of our common life. The future, we must understand, is not predetermined. What the new century will be is not prescribed. What it will be is up to us. Within the configuration of constraints we are bequeathed by our past, our future is an open possibility. Many peoples, aware of that open possibility, are clamoring for radical change in our forms of interaction domestically and internationally on the supposition that we have it within our powers to create a new time and a new way of life—in some fashion, we like to think, an advance on the present. From many angles and in many venues, struggles are underway about social and cultural reconstruction. And, as all the parties to those struggles are aware, the stakes are high.

*In this context, the question we are compelled to ask—of ourselves and of each other—is two-sided. It is political and it is religious. On its politi-*

*cal side, the question, most simply put, is: How shall we live our lives together? On its religious side, the question, cast most directly, is: Who are we? What is our place and our destiny in the world?* These two sides of the question are, I would insist, caught up with each other. They cannot, in the final analysis, be separated, although each addresses its own dimension of the matter. The question in both of its forms is, at this moment, urgent.

To be sure, if we are even minimally aware of all the repercussions and reticulations of our everyday lives, we know that we are constantly providing some sort of response to that two-sided question. The shape of our future and the meaning of our lives is ever being determined afresh by how we conceive ourselves and how we interact with each other, even if all we do is to reproduce the routine forms of thought and interaction we have inherited. That is so often—too often—the path of greatest ease even when we find that path somewhat uncomfortable. Yet these everyday determinations are far from humdrum. At particularly eventful moments, we can discern their import with stark clarity, sometimes with frightful clarity, especially when we are brought to awaken from our slumbers and to realize the depth and extent of suffering that results from what appear to be ordinary routines.

Consider, in this light, some of the major political eruptions of the twentieth century. During that period, we have been confronted with a range of massive drives to capture the minds and energies of people that have, in time, exploded in devastating violence—fascism, state socialism, apartheid, religious authoritarianism, neocolonialism, military dictatorship. All of these movements have tended to proclaim commitment to high principle. All of them, at least for a time, became settled (and respected) ways of life somewhere in the world. Yet all of them have threatened whole classes of humans with subjugation if not annihilation—and were often, sad to say, true to their word. Other forms of political contention have appeared more benign, even joining in common battle against the extremes, but oftentimes conniving to conceal, while seeking to suppress, important revolutionary struggles against them by dissenting groups—associated by race, class, gender, ethnic heritage, or nationalist identity—each of them (those in dissent) seeking liberation from the oppressive rule of established powers.

Sometimes, in the United States, we tend to consider these eruptions and struggles as merely momentary aberrations, exceptional cases, not unimportant, but to be gotten over as quickly as possible in order to return to business as usual. Moreover, we suspect that “poli-

tics” in its ordinary course is no more than a tiresome struggle over who gets what, when, where, and how—a jockeying for privilege and power, an effort to shift the burdens of our common endeavors onto others and to gain more benefits for ourselves. That’s certainly one way to read the political process.

But that way of reading the political process is superficial if not deceptive. It skims the surface of what is more profoundly at stake in the public forum. The deeper concern of the public forum—even when the question of distribution (who gets what, when, and how much) is the immediate item on the agenda—is the shape and extent of our togetherness (that’s the political side of the question posed above). And how we address that concern depends on how we construe our identity and our destiny (that’s the religious side of the question posed above). That is, the struggles that transpire in the public forum are never merely over how to allocate the benefits and burdens of a social system even though that may be their immediate manifestation. They are, if you will, struggles over our soul. They are struggles over how we understand ourselves, our relationships with each other, our place in the world, our responsibility to the future, our participation in the whole ongoing community of life. The question of distribution, that is, is inextricably linked to the question of ontology (who are we, what is the shape of our relationship with each other, what is the character of our destiny?).

At the moment, the public forum in the United States is alive with contending perspectives on these questions, each promoting its own way of approaching the future, each delineating some way of comprehending our identity and our destiny, each with a vision of what the new century should be. That is the context in the midst of which I have initiated this move toward a politics of relationality. In a sense, of course, this proposal for a politics of relationality simply adds one more voice to the public forum. But I am convinced that it is more than simply one more voice. I am convinced that, given the current circumstances of the community of life, a politics of relationality is more sensible, more adequate, more responsive to those circumstances than are the alternatives.

*We are, in my judgment, living at a time of crisis—a time at which the health (if not the survival) of the entire community of life, human and nonhuman, is at risk. We need to shape our political and our religious commitments in response to that condition with the objective of reorienting our lives and transforming our institutions in a way that contributes to*

*the vibrancy and vigor of the whole community and each of its members.* We must address the ecological crisis where untold numbers of species are rapidly becoming extinct. We must address the social crisis where forgotten and marginalized peoples are suffering under conditions of neglect and oppression. We must address the economic crisis where circumstances of absolute poverty keep one-fifth of the world's population in misery. We must address the political crisis where violence tends to reign supreme and freedoms are severely curtailed. But we can address this manifold crisis adequately, I believe, only if we can come to understand ourselves as denizens of a vast and variegated community of life—denizens whose well-being as selves is intimately intertwined with the well-being of all. That is a central understanding of the politics of relationality and sets it apart from other voices currently dominant in the American public forum.

Among those voices, a *politics of welfare* played a prominent role for over fifty years in the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> The politics of welfare, epitomized in the New Deal, emerged as an effort to mitigate the dysfunctional effects of the burgeoning growth of a highly concentrated corporative industrialism initiated during the turn from the nineteenth century to the twentieth century. The New Deal's programs—intended to stabilize the economy, to develop a social insurance program for the needy, to provide employment for the able-bodied, and to protect the vulnerable from exploitation by those in control of the productive process—were inspired by a principle of equality. From the standpoint of a politics of welfare, as civilization advances, no one should be deprived of the benefits of the social system; no one should be left out; each and every citizen holds equal rights in the distribution of the basic powers and privileges of the political and economic order. But, in large part, the politics of welfare has not been transformative. It is designed primarily as remedial. Its overarching concern is to sustain the dominant system of corporate industrialism, although to spread its benefits more evenly across the citizenry.

However, with the Reagan Revolution, the politics of welfare collided with a *politics of liberty* (whether under the banner of neoconservatism or libertarianism).<sup>3</sup> The politics of liberty, resting on a principle of desert, launched a wholesale attack on the redistributive policies of the welfare state as, in effect, a form of illegal if not immoral confiscation. Appealing to traditional rights of the classical liberal tradition—rights of private ownership and of voluntary exchange—its stated intent was to delimit the functions of government. The basic purpose

of government, from this perspective, is fundamentally if not solely protective: hence the need for an indomitable military force and a vigorous program of law and order. Otherwise, individuals—either alone or in corporate associations—are to be left to live their lives as they wish, to use their fortunes as they see fit, and to dispose of resources they possess without constraint. Whatever responsibilities individuals (or corporations) may have to others (aside from respecting their inalienable rights) must be undertaken voluntarily. Given the politics of liberty, the use of coercive power to enforce such responsibilities, however important those responsibilities might be, is simply improper.

During that same period of time, groups from somewhat different traditions raised serious questions about both the politics of welfare and the politics of liberty. Those forms of politics, while attending, each in its own way, to the important issue of how the burdens and benefits of the social process are to be distributed, are, it was claimed, utterly neglectful of a more profound issue of social morality, namely, what, within the ethos of a people, enables it to cohere, to collaborate, to sustain its basic traditions and institutions? Out of concern for this issue arose a *politics of community* with its primary focus on virtue—the kinds of moral and political virtue that constitute the character and continuity of a people. Where concerns for liberty and equality may, with appreciably different results, honor our individuality (therefore our separateness), they both overlook the vital human quality of sociability (therefore our connectedness). In some versions, the politics of community promotes the particular virtues and principles of a traditional religious heritage (e.g., the Christian Coalition).<sup>4</sup> In other versions, it takes a more latitudinarian position, stressing the republican values of respect, tolerance, mutuality, caring (e.g., communitarianism).<sup>5</sup>

Not all peoples in the American public forum, however, are attracted to the seeming magnanimity of communitarianism or to the high principles of either the politics of welfare or the politics of liberty. All these forms of politics are discerned as deceptive, favoring, despite their claims to the contrary, the wealthy and powerful, the privileged, the dominant class of the social system. The alternative is a *politics of difference*, a multicultural politics, generated by the sufferings of communities of people subordinated and marginalized by the mainstream, communities whose needs and values are ignored (or distorted through cooptation) by the major institutions of the United States.<sup>6</sup> In supporting a politics of difference, various communities of color, gays and lesbians, immigrants from *conquistador* lands (formerly designated

“Third World” countries), feminist and womanist groups are concerned not merely to preserve the values and sensibilities of their respective traditions of experience. Their intent is far more radical than that. They are engaged in a fundamental critique of the presuppositions and import of corporate capitalism. They resist seemingly well-intentioned efforts to assimilate them into the prevailing system out of their commitment to a style of life in which economic values are subordinated to other, more humane values and the cultural imperialism of mainstream America is eschewed.

Equally critical of dominant institutions with their overweening drive toward economic growth and their propensity to measure all things as an economic resource is a *politics of ecology*, which—in its more extreme forms—is yet a minor voice in the American public forum, although it manifests a proper concern for the place and role of the human species within the biosphere.<sup>7</sup> From a genuinely ecological perspective, humans are forced to reassess their identity and their responsibility to the entire community of life. While in comparison with other species, we have our own genius, our interests and desires should not, from this angle, run rough-shod over other forms of life. Rather we should, through our institutional policies and practices, promote the sustainability of those ecosystems of which we are a part and which are composed of a delicate balance among diverse kinds of living and nonliving entities. From this standpoint, we are in desperate need of radically reconstructing the way we think about ourselves and the way in which we live our lives.

Each of these forms of politics in the American public forum, in my judgment, has some merit in the sense that each, at its best, bears witness to a moral principle worthy of serious consideration:

- politics of welfare: respect for the *dignity* of all agents in the community;
- politics of liberty: deference to the *subjectivity* of each agent in the community;
- politics of community: the need for *empathy* among all members of the community;
- politics of difference: the importance of *diversity* within the community;
- politics of ecology: the *inclusiveness* of all forms of life within the community.

But none of these forms of politics, by itself, seems adequate as a response to the crisis that confronts us. Each of them, in fact, by itself, demonstrates severe limitations in comprehending the depth and character of the crisis that typifies our moment in the world's history. In that context, I am proposing a politics of relationality as a possibility that incorporates all of these principles, but in a reconfiguration that stretches beyond them and constructs a cogent possibility for our transition into the twenty-first century. At the heart of the politics of relationality is a principle of justice as solidarity.

### JUSTICE AS SOLIDARITY

In times such as these, if we are cognizant—and honest—about the circumstances that make up our common life, we must admit to the thick interdependency of our lives. We cannot be what we are, we cannot do what we do, we cannot accomplish what we accomplish apart from one another. Perhaps more than we can ever fully discern, our lives are but expressions, albeit creative expressions, of a communal matrix that sustains us, inspires us, and constitutes the origin of our dreams and yearnings, our obligations and our rights. We are members of each other. We belong together. That is the source of our joy in life, although that is, as well, the source of the tragedies of life, the dark side of our history, which, on all too many occasions, makes us shudder and anxious about our destiny.

I do not mean this comment, please understand, as sheer sentimentality. It is, instead, both a political affirmation and a religious declaration, and, as such, it provides an opening for reflection on a major theme of the politics of relationality—the principle of justice as solidarity. I shall explain what I mean by justice as solidarity under the headings of four subthemes: alienation, relationality, otherness, and spirituality.

As an entrée to this reflection, I would call upon a well-known declamation of the ancient Hebrew prophet, Amos: "I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. . . . But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."<sup>8</sup> On the face of it, that declamation was a rather harsh commentary on the customary solemnity of temples and courts with all their ceremonial falderal. But, more profoundly, we should recall that Amos was addressing a society riven with divisions: between rich and

poor, rulers and subjects, priests and people, elite and needy. The covenant of justice, a covenant of brotherhood and sisterhood had been broken. Suffering was rampant. The powerful and affluent were unresponsive. Amos, speaking the voice of the covenantal God, was, in these words, calling the people to repentance—to a radical transformation in their ways of understanding and in their social and political practices. Justice, expressive of the mind of God, was a judgment against the perversities of the day and a vision of possibilities for tomorrow. The concept of justice in Amos, while not without distributive connotations (who gets what and how much), was, more accurately, indicative of the quality of a vibrant community, a community whose energies are directed to the welfare of all its members, a community through which the life of each and all might be continuously nourished, from birth to death. That's the import of solidarity. Justice as solidarity is a synonym for the covenantal community.

Against that backdrop, consider four subthemes that bear on the meaning of justice as solidarity.

First, alienation. We are living in a time of intense suffering. In large part, that suffering is a consequence, directly or indirectly, of patterns of human interaction. By suffering, I mean not so much discomfort (a subjective feeling) as deprivation (an objective condition). We suffer when deprived of that range of possibilities that makes up a vibrant community.

To be so deprived is a function of prevailing forms of symbiosis. Those deprived, even those living under the most dire of circumstances, are still, in their suffering, participants in the human community. That is why I use the term *alienation*. Alienation is a negative form of belonging. Alienation is not so much the separation of person from person or group from group as a form of interaction through which a people is constrained, by the seeming necessities of the case, to act against their own good, albeit to the seeming advantage and under the hegemonic control of another people.

Instances are not hard to come by: women whose lives are largely determined by the predominance of patriarchal social forms; blacks forced to live and to work in the bowels of racist institutional structures; workers whose livelihood is configured by the dictation of economic powers beyond their grasp. We should add, in this era of emergent ecological consciousness, the whole sphere of animality and vegetation which has become so extensively governed and exploited by the prescriptions of human interest.

Structures of alienation are pervasive throughout the world, even, ironically enough, coopting valiant efforts to modify or to transform them. In developing his controversial thesis about the “permanence of racism” in the United States, Derrick Bell observes: “Black people will never gain full equality in this country. Even those herculean efforts we hail as successful will produce no more than temporary ‘peaks of progress,’ short-lived victories that slide into irrelevance as racial patterns adapt in ways that maintain white dominance.”<sup>9</sup>

However, the irony deepens, for, I would maintain, the deprivations of alienation are visited on all its parties, dominant and subordinate. That is the burden of James Baldwin’s advice to his young nephew—that he, as a black, must, despite impulses to the contrary, accept white people, even with love, because, he insists, these “people have no other hope. They are, in effect, still trapped in a history which they do not understand; and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it.” These white people, he admonished, are your own brothers and sisters, your lost, younger brothers and sisters, and we must, out of love, force them “to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality, and begin to change it. For this is your home, my friend, do not be driven from it.”<sup>10</sup>

I do not mean, by citing Baldwin’s advice, to suggest that the full task of struggling against the structures of alienation falls to the primary victims; but I do mean to propose that primary victims have a wisdom about our condition that others require for their own enlightenment and that, from the perspective of our profoundest good, we are all victimized by these structures. Whether alienation is present in the fury of military action, the dynamics of corporate capitalism, or the seductive powers of mass media, we are—as primary victims discern with greater lucidity than the rest of us—all caught up in a system devoid of the quality of solidarity, save in rare, but precious, moments of disclosure, moments revelatory of an alternative possibility.

Second subtheme: relationality. Underlying the sociology of alienation is an ontology of relationality, by which I mean that each of us, even in our uniqueness, is a living distillation of generations of interaction. We are social beings whose individuality can be comprehended only contextually. Our identity, while bearing the stamp of our own agency, is nonetheless contingent on an organic inheritance the full depths of which we cannot pretend to comprehend fully. The more each of us pursues what *oppresses us* *what we* are, the more we are led

into all the nooks and crannies of the whole community of life across the millennia.

In stressing our dependency on that nexus of relationships that constitutes our matrix and that is part and parcel of our very selves, I do not mean to detract from our creativity. What each of us feels, what each of us thinks, what each of us does makes a difference in the world. We are born of a past, but we are progenitors of a future. There is, in short, a constant interplay between our selves as creative agents and the world as an inheritance bequeathed to each tomorrow. The quality of that interplay is the subject of all normative discourse, including moral reflection, political thought, and jurisprudence.

In the case of Anglo-American jurisprudence, engaged nowadays in a multivoiced and serious contention over the meaning and character of law, I would, for purposes of this exercise, contrast two possibilities, each constructed on its own ontological understanding: a jurisprudence of individuality and a jurisprudence of solidarity. The former, a jurisprudence of individuality, is concentrated on the basic norm: preserve autonomy! The latter, a jurisprudence of solidarity, is focused on an alternative basic norm: enhance community! In their contrast to the prevailing world situation, both are revolutionary in import, that is, both run contrary to the prevailing practice of law.

The former is exemplified in Richard A. Epstein's recent proposal of six "simple rules for a complex world"<sup>11</sup> which, he claims, extracts the genius of the common law. The foundational rule of the set—individual self-ownership—as it expands, developing its implications, gives rise to three correlative rules—of property ("you take what you can get"), contract ("voluntary exchange"), and torts ("keep off"). Understanding the need, now and then, to encroach on each other's sphere of life, Epstein attaches a two-sided secondary rule, summarized as "take and pay," that is, under conditions of necessity, it is not always inappropriate to consume another's property, but in such cases just compensation is requisite.

The model is elegant in its simplicity, but seems utterly lacking in reality in its failure to comprehend the dynamics of alienation. Its ultimate flaw is ontological. In its drive to preserve autonomy and thereby to promote the market as the most efficient means for the resolution of social problems, it ignores our essential connectedness with the community of life. It is narrowly anthropocentric, neglectful of the deep ecology of our living circumstance, and it is unrelentingly individualistic, neglectful of the interactive character of culture and history.

As an alternative perspective on who we are, how we live, and what we might do to better shape our common life, consider Carol Gould's version of a feminist ontology, summarized in these words:

although it is only individual human beings that exercise agency and not institutions or society as a whole, yet these individuals are social beings who act in and through their social relations. They engage in joint or common agency in which they seek to realize common goals; or, in pursuit of their individual goals, they require the respect, recognition, or forbearance of others, and their individual acts bear on others in various ways. When individuals act with respect to each other, their relations take the form either of domination and subordination or of reciprocity.<sup>12</sup>

Gould's is an ontology of relationality, giving rise to an understanding of history as a dialectic between alienation and solidarity. The vision she has articulated provides a firm foundation for a jurisprudence of solidarity in which the driving passion of law is not so much to protect the individual against trespass as it is to create a quality of social interaction conducive to the flourishing of a vibrant community of life across the world. That, I would propose, is the profoundest aim of justice.

Third subtheme: otherness. At this point, we must be cautious. I have been unfolding the meaning of justice as solidarity. I have been promoting that principle as a quality that should permeate the structures of our common life. I have affirmed that justice so understood should be the driving passion of our normative discourse. But the demands of solidarity might seem, on initial consideration, to smack of conformism, requiring each and every member of the community to assume the same character, to adopt the same style of life, to look and to act alike. Can justice as solidarity take account of eccentricity, difference, otherness, alterity? I would like to think so.

Consider, in this connection Patricia Cain's critique of prevailing forms of feminist jurisprudence. Feminist jurisprudence, she declares, is singularized by its attention to the peculiarities of female experience—the joys and sorrows, the questions, the needs, the limitations, the deprivations of that experience. But whose experience counts? She charges that “current feminist legal theory is deficient and impoverished because it has not paid sufficient attention to the real life experiences of women who do not speak the ‘dominant discourse.’”<sup>13</sup> Feminist legal theory, while properly serving as a critique of the blind-

ers that constrain traditional forms of law, must itself be subjected to critique, to a kind of self-critique; it must guard against assuming that female experience is uniform; it must, for instance, as Cain insists, become open to the lesbian possibility. "Feminist legal theory must recognize differences in order to avoid reinforcing lesbian invisibility or marginality."<sup>14</sup>

In sum, the lesbian, too, if I may put it this way, has place in the community—that place must be recognized and respected within the structures of the community, that voice must be heard, that way of living out one's destiny must be honored. That is how I would construe—admittedly for my own purposes—the ancient precept: "You shall not wrong or oppress a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."<sup>15</sup> The covenantal community embraces the stranger. It greets the stranger as companion, understanding that the other, however strange or familiar, belongs to the circle of life. Whether ordinary or extraordinary, mainstream or sidestream, we are all participants in the common adventure of life and must be regarded as such. Each, in our uniqueness, has something to contribute to that adventure.

That is the spirit that underlies Henry James Young's "theology of social pluralism," an instructive effort to demonstrate the compatibility of a relational ontology with the African American experience.

Within a pluralistic society the goal is to discover ways of allowing self-actualization in the context of relationality. This requires an open system rather than a closed one. . . . For individuals in society to relate successfully to others they have to be open and vulnerable. And Whitehead's notion of interdependence, which is primary in his notion of the self, suggests that while maintaining a sense of openness to other ethnic social groups, one should also adhere to one's own unique ethnic tradition.<sup>16</sup>

As Young intimates in his concept of social pluralism, within the orbit of justice as solidarity, there is a normative boundary to otherness, but a boundary that is fluid, a boundary whose precise delineations are always open to renegotiation. The boundary emanates from the burden of reciprocity: as one demands respect from others, so one ought show respect for others. In our differences, we must not forget our togetherness. In this sense, an ethics of rights and an ethics of care are conjoined by a principle of complementarity and, in their conjunction, both are necessary ingredients of any effective politics of difference.

Final subtheme: spirituality. The vision of justice as solidarity in the construction I am proposing rests, ultimately, on an affirmation of the reality of spirit as a dimension of all existence. I am here following the lead of Bernard E. Meland, a radical empiricist theologian out of the tradition of process thought, who defines spirit in the following way:

Spirit connotes a depth of sensitivity that forms the matrix of relations in which all life is cast. This depth of sensitivity is not so much known as lived in. It is a kind of womb or matrix out of which the waking life of individual persons emerges and in which individuals participate, knowingly or unknowingly, as living creatures. We may say that spirit is a quality of being which arises out of a particular depth of sensitivity in relations. It is, in other words, a goodness in relationships.<sup>17</sup>

In affirming the reality of spirit so understood, I do not mean to identify all forms of sociality with spirit. The bulk of our ordinary interactions is conducted devoid of any explicit attention to the dimension of spirit at all. These interactions have, instead, a utilitarian cast; they are, as we tend to say, of a practical nature. They enable us to cope with the immediate needs of survival. They call upon an everyday wisdom, much of which is passed on by word of mouth, and they conform to routine expectations. In itself, the utilitarian orientation is benign and may even be necessary to fulfill some of the more immediate needs of life. After all, garbage must be collected, clothes must be cleaned, houses must be constructed, food must be prepared, resources must be transported.

However, the utilitarian orientation, whether manifested in the grubbiness of everyday chores or in the seemingly sophisticated manipulations of corporate capitalism, has an almost irresistible tendency to become all-consuming, and to set itself up as the sole mark of progress and success. When that happens, the results are often disastrous, ranging from indifference and neglect (as in the treatment of the homeless or of school children in the inner city) to hostility and oppression (as in the formation of sweatshops or efforts to undercut labor unions), resulting in the formation of massive structures of alienation—all justified as long as “the job gets done” and gets done “efficiently.”

We know better, I would like to think, than to allow this tendency, however powerful its presence, to coopt our personal relationships and our institutional forms. We know better because of those moments when we are visited with an intimation of the reality of spirit—when,

however fleetingly, we become aware of the uncalculated goodness inherent in the depth of sensitivity on which each of us is so dependent for our ultimate sanity and from which we obtain a presentment of authentic value. An intensified awareness of this matrix of sensitivity would mean, in its effects on us, the deepening and extending of our own sensitivity to life in all its forms and manifestations—to its joys and sorrows, its heights and its limitations. It would move us from the crude realism of aggressive competitiveness toward the more genuine realism of creative intercommunication.

Appreciative consciousness is Meland's language to indicate that orientation of mind which, provoked by wonder, makes for maximal openness to the rich fullness of events and respect for the possibilities of growth resident in those events. In the interaction of life with life, appreciative consciousness is marked by receptivity to the other, rapport with the other, and release of energies toward the creation of new forms of interaction with the other—all with the aim of enabling that inclusive community in which self and other are participants to flourish. With appreciative consciousness, one discerns structures of alienation for what they are and is empowered to stretch beyond those structures toward the formation of new lines of relationship, moving us all, in however minimal a way, in the direction of justice as solidarity. Appreciative consciousness, in this sense, is an exercise in spirituality—born of an awareness that, with our differences, we belong together; nurtured in its openness to our communal ground; and given force as we press toward the transformation of our common life, overcoming structures of alienation and sensitizing us all to the lives of each other.

On one level, I am not at all sanguine about the prospects of this vision of justice as solidarity in our current context. The forces that militate against it seem to predominate at this point in our history. On another level, I am convinced that, in the final analysis, the community of life is contingent, for its survival and its sustenance, on justice as solidarity. Without its presence among us, we simply could not continue to be. That surely is the point of Meland's plaint—that "existence in most instances is sustained by a perilously slight margin of sensitivity." But, wonder of all wonders, it is so sustained. Perhaps at times all we can do in our pursuit of a politics of relationality is to resist any further erosion of that margin. If nothing else, that in itself is a vocation worthy of our commitment. At the same time such a holding action should not deter us from the more revolutionary impulse that inheres in the vision of justice as solidarity, at least as I intend it.

## AGENDA

The ontology of relationality, presented above as the second subtheme of justice as solidarity, is the basic supposition informing all the chapters that follow. From that perspective, I am making a case for a politics of relationality—a form of action in which the quality of our connectedness with each other is of eminent importance, more so than the kinds of goods and benefits that accrue to each of us in our separateness from each other. A politics of relationality is a form of communitarian theory, but, in the version I am delineating, of a sort that is not reluctant to call on the agency of government to engage actively and vigorously throughout our social and economic associations to promote justice as solidarity. Communitarianism nowadays is often called upon to promote a kind of social conservatism and political localism. But I intend a communitarianism that is consistent with a robust pluralism and an inclusive public forum whose aim is the conjunctive participation of us all in a unity of adventure.

In Part I, I am proposing a reinterpretation of the idea of human rights, contrasting it with the more individualist interpretation customary in traditional liberalism and illustrating its import by attention to the controversial issues of the rights of children and affirmative action.

In Part II, I focus on the character of economic relations, developing a reinterpretation of the meaning of property and suggesting the need to incorporate the principles of strong democracy into the structure of corporate governance. Following through on the implications of a relational approach to economic theory, I present a brief defense of the democratic socialist vision despite the wide-spread claim that socialism as an option is dead.

The chapters in Part III are devoted to the problematique of religion within contemporary culture, acknowledging the need for a radical critique of religious thought and practice and dealing directly with the matter of religious pluralism and the effects of that pluralism on our common life. Moreover, I argue, somewhat audaciously, that, at its profoundest (religious) level, understanding—the kind of understanding we should be promoting in all our educational institutions—is conjoined with compassion and a drive for justice, providing therewith a point from which a critique of traditional religion is possible.

Part IV stems from an acknowledgment that, under current conditions, we confront—almost overwhelmingly—a politics of annihila-

tion and we must seek a means of approaching serious social conflict in more constructive ways than we have tended to in the past. I suggest that that is a task intrinsic to the mission of higher education and I call upon the tradition of nonviolence as an alternative mode of confronting oppositional forces, domestically and internationally.

In Part V, I make explicit the need to broaden the politics of relationality to include the whole biosphere, drawing together the concerns of both deep ecology and social ecology. I conclude with a note on the conjunction between the ecological principle and koinonology, the kind of moral reflection that, I suggest, should be paramount in our practical life as we move into a new century.

All the chapters that follow are inspired by the Johannine sentiment that is too often limited to close intimate relations but that, I would assert, is equally applicable to the political structures that sustain our lives:

Beloved, let us love one another; for love is of God, and those who love are born of God and know God. Those who do not love do not know God; for God is love. (I John 4:7)

That religious sentiment, as I explicate it throughout this text, is conveyed through the philosophical principle of internal relations (in the depth of our being, we belong to each other) and the political principle of justice as solidarity (as we belong to each other, so, while celebrating our differences, we are to work together for the sake of us all).