

During my latest re-reading of Niebuhr's "The Truth in Myths," I've become ever more confident of two conclusions.

First, Niebuhr's argument concerning "myth" is flawed throughout by the manifest contradiction evident in the concluding paragraph of the essay:

The transcendent source of the meaning of life is thus in such relation to all temporal process that a profound insight into any process or reality yields a glimpse of the reality which is beyond it. This reality can be revealed and expressed only in mythical terms. These mythical terms are the most adequate symbols of reality because the reality which we experience constantly suggests a center and source of reality, which not only transcends immediate experience, but also finally transcends the rational forms and categories by which we seek to apprehend and describe it.

Clearly, a phrase such as "the transcendent source of the meaning of life," or a statement that "a profound insight into any process or reality yields a glimpse of the reality which is beyond it," cannot be supposed to be cast in mythical terms, or in any terms transcending "rational forms and categories." Either "reality" is used and to be understood as precisely "a rational form and category" or else Niebuhr's statement collapses into a meaningless jumble of words. So the most that he is entitled to claim is not that "this reality can be revealed and expressed only in mythical terms," but only that what is revealed and expressed in mythical terms (at any rate, in *some* such terms) is a reality, and that they, therefore, can and should be demythologized, accordingly, in "rational forms and categories" such as he himself continually uses, although only with much greater care than he shows any signs of having taken in selecting them and in systematically clarifying their meaning. "Reality"? "In what sense, 'reality'?" And "How is this sense at once the same as, and different from, the other senses in which we use, or may use, the term?"

The second conclusion is that Niebuhr is, and clearly intends to be, in his own way, an "empirical" theologian—or, as I would prefer to say, an *experiential* theologian. Consider the following line of reasoning:

[T]he problem of religion is how it may define God without resorting to a dogmatic acceptance of whatever mythical definition a particular historic tradition has entrusted to a certain portion of the religious community. The modern reaction against naturalism and

rationalism expressed in Barthianism fails, significantly, to escape dogmatism. It is superior to the older dogmatisms of orthodox religion in that it does not insist on the scientific and rational validity of the mythical details of its tradition. The Fall and the Resurrection are not conceived as historical in its theology. But the total truth of the Biblical myth is asserted dogmatically with no effort to validate Christianity in experience against competition with other religions.

How is it possible to escape this dogmatism? It is possible only if it be realized that though human knowledge and experience always point to a source of meaning in life which transcends knowledge and experience, there are nevertheless suggestions of this transcendence in experience. Great myths have actually been born out of profound experience and are constantly subject to verification by experience. It may be simplest to illustrate this point in terms of a specific religious doctrine: the Christian doctrine that God is love and that love is the highest moral ideal.

The ideal of love is not a caprice of mythology. It is not true because the Cross has revealed it. The Cross justifies itself to human faith because it symbolizes an ideal which establishes points of relevance with the deeper experiences and insights of human life.

The ideal of love can be validated as the ultimate moral ideal because it stands in a verifiable transcendent relation to all rational idealism. It is both the fulfillment and the abyss of the rational ideal of justice. . . .

The Cross in Christian faith is the myth of the truth of the ideal of love.

The "great myths" of religion for whose truth Niebuhr argues "have actually been born out of profound experience and are constantly subject to verification by experience." Exactly! It couldn't be said better by any self-professed "empirical" theologian I've ever known. Nor has anyone known to me ever better explained why Christian witness is true, if it is true: it is not true because it is revealed; it justifies itself to "human faith" [*sic!*] because it re-presents a truth that "establishes points of relevance with the deeper experiences and insights of human life."

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