

Niebuhr is fond of formulations such as the following:

"[Hebraic] prophetism has the first understanding of the fact that the real problem of history is not the finiteness of all human endeavors, which must wait for their completion by divine power. The real problem of history is the proud pretension of all human endeavors, which seeks to obscure their finite and partial character and thereby involves history in evil and sin" (*NDM*, 2: 25).

"[T]he real problem of prophetism [*sc.* the real problem of history, according to prophetism] is not the finite character of all historical achievement, though that remains one of the subordinate problems. The real problem is presented by the prophetic recognition that all history is involved in a perennial defiance of the law of God" (28 f.).

"The real question is not whether we are able to achieve absolute perfection in history; for even the most consistent perfectionist sects do not deny that human life remains in process. The question is whether in the development of the new life some contradiction between human self-will and the divine purpose remains. The issue is whether the basic character of human history, as it is apprehended in the Christian faith, is overcome in the lives of those who have thus apprehended it" (121).

I have two comments:

1. "The real problem" that Niebuhr takes, in the first two passages, to have been identified by Hebraic prophetism is, obviously, but one particular formulation of the human problem identified, in some terms or other, by all of the axial religions. It is that formulation, namely, which simply takes for granted, or necessarily presupposes, a theistic/monotheistic/radically monotheistic world view, or understanding of existence. Given that world view, or understanding of existence, the real problem of human history is seen to be the real problem of each and every human being, that she or he radically misunderstands, and is ever prone thus to misunderstand, her- or himself in the

ultimate setting of her or his existence *coram Deo*, notwithstanding that the truth about this setting has always already been made known, if only implicitly.

2. So far as the third passage is concerned, I think it requires the larger context in which Niebuhr himself places it in order to be appreciated in its full meaning and depth. The context to which I refer begins immediately after the passage as cited above.

That question would seem to find one answer in logic and another in experience. It is logical to assume that when man has become aware of the character of his self-love and of its incompatibility with the divine will, this very awareness would break its power. Furthermore, this logic is at least partially validated by experience. Repentance does initiate a new life. But the experience of the Christian ages refutes those who follow this logic and without qualification. The sorry annals of Christian fanaticism, of unholy religious hatreds, of sinful ambitions hiding behind the cloak of religious sanctity, of political power impulses compounded with pretensions of devotion to God, offer the most irrefutable proof of the error in every Christian doctrine and every interpretation of the Christian experience which claim that grace can remove the final contradiction between man and God. The sad experiences of Christian history show how human pride and spiritual arrogance rise to new heights precisely at the point where the claims of sanctity are made without due qualification.

A tragic and revealing aspect of the experience of the Christian ages is that, again and again, 'publicans and sinners' have had to rescue an important aspect of truth about life, and restore wholesomeness into human relations, against the fanaticism of Christian saints, who had forgotten that sainthood is corrupted whenever holiness is claimed as a simple possession. A full appreciation of the profundities of the Christian faith must therefore prompt gratitude to these 'publicans and sinners' for their periodic testimony against the Christian Church whenever it has forgotten the full truth of its gospel and has allowed itself to be betrayed into new forms of self-righteousness. The publicans and sinners do not, of course, have the full truth either. For when they turn from the moral scepticism, which enables them to challenge religious fanaticism, they develop fanatic furies of their own. They have no principle of interpreting life which can save them from alternate moods of scepticism and fanaticism. But that does not change the fact that a moral sceptic, who regards all truth and all goodness as merely a cloak of self-interest, does at least understand the perennial egoistic corruption of truth and goodness. He is finally betrayed into moral nihilism because he knows nothing of the truth and goodness, not so corrupted, which are the possession of faith alone. The protest of secularism against Catholicism in all national cultures, in which Catholicism has played the dominant role and has invariably compounded the relativities of politics and history with the ultimate sanctities, is particularly instructive in this connection.

If we examine any individual life, or any social achievement in history, it becomes apparent that there are infinite possibilities of organizing life from beyond the centre of the self; and equally infinite

possibilities of drawing the self back into the centre of the organization. The former possibilities are always fruits of grace (though frequently it is the 'hidden Christ' and a grace which is not fully known which initiates the miracle). They are always the fruits of grace because any life which cannot 'forget' itself and which merely makes brotherhood the instrument of its 'happiness' or its 'perfection' cannot really escape the vicious circle of egocentricity. Yet the possibilities of new evil cannot be avoided by grace; for so long as the self, individual or collective, remains within the tensions of history and is subject to the twofold condition of involvement in process and transcendence over it, it will be subject to the sin of overestimating its transcendence and of compounding its interests with those which are more inclusive.

There are thus indeterminate possibilities of redeeming parenthood from the lust of power and making the welfare of the child the end of family life. But there are also many possibilities of using the loving relationship of the family as an instrument of the parental power impulse on a higher or more subtle level. The 'saints' may not be conscious of this fault; but the children who have to extricate themselves from the too close and enduring embrace of loving parents know about it. There are indeterminate possibilities of relating the family to the community on higher and higher levels of harmony. But there is no possibility of a family escaping the fault of regarding its own weal and woe as more important to the whole than it really is. There are unlimited opportunities of relating 'our' nation more harmoniously to the lives of other nations; but there is no possibility of doing so without some corruption of national egoism.

It is not easy to express both of these two aspects of the life of grace, to which all history attests without seeming to offend the canons of logic. That is one reason why moralists have always found it rather easy to discount the doctrine of 'justification by faith.' But here, as in many cases, a seeming defiance of logic is merely the consequence of an effort to express the complex facts of experience. It happens to be true to the facts of experience that in one sense the converted man is righteous and that in another sense he is not. . . .

The theologies which have sought to do justice to the fact that saints nevertheless remain sinners have frequently, perhaps usually, obscured the indeterminate possibilities of realizations of good in both individual and collective life. The theologies which have sought to do justice to the positive aspects of regeneration have usually obscured the realities of sin which appear on every new level of virtue. This has been particularly true of modern versions of Christian perfectionism; because in them evolutionary and progressive interpretations of history have been compounded with illusions which have a more purely Christian source.

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[I]t is important to emphasize that the two sides of the experience of grace are so related that they do not contradict but support each other. To understand that the Christ in us is not a possession but a hope, that perfection is not a reality but an intention; that such peace as we know in this life is never purely the peace of achievement but the serenity of being 'completely known and all forgiven'; all this does not destroy moral ardour or responsibility. On the contrary it is the only way of preventing premature completions of life, or arresting the new and more terrible pride which may find its roots in the soil of humility, and of saving the

Christian life from the intolerable pretensions of saints who have forgotten that they are sinners.

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