

Niebuhr asserts that "Hebraic prophetism" is "the beginning of revelation in the history of religion" (*NDM*, 2:25). But, for all he ever shows to the contrary, the most he's entitled to assert is considerably less than this. He's justified in claiming only that "Hebraic prophetism" is "the beginning of revelation" *in one particular branch* of the history of religion—namely, the theistic/montheistic/radical monotheistic branch that has been so significant in Western, as distinct from Eastern, culture.

With Hebraic prophetism, we do indeed experience the emergence of axial religion in a theistic/monotheistic/radical monotheistic context. But, as is now generally recognized, roughly the same historical period—what Jaspers calls "the axial period"—witnessed the emergence of yet other formally similar, if materially different, axial religions in yet other nontheistic branches of the history of religions. And each of them, also, may fairly claim to be "the beginning of revelation" in substantially the same sense, in its own religio-cultural context.

This becomes clear beyond possible doubt from Niebuhr's own interpretation of the meaning of his assertion. Prophetism is "the beginning of revelation," he explains, "because here, for the first time, in the history of culture the eternal and divine is not regarded as the extension and fulfillment of the highest human possibilities, whether conceived in particularistic or universalistic terms. God's word is spoken *against* both his favored nation and all nations. This means that 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 seek to obscure their finite and partial [*sc.* fragmentary!] character[,] and therefore involves history in evil and sin" (25).

In other words, on Niebuhr's own account, "the real problem of history" identified by the Hebrew prophets is but one particular form of the same problem identified, in one way or another, by all the axial religions as *the* human problem—namely, the problem created by the fact that human beings universally understand themselves only in the inauthentic mode of

*misunderstanding* themselves—and do this, not merely because they are finite and their insights, as Niebuhr implies, only partial, but also because they turn away from the original, if only implicit, insight that they are always already given, choosing, freely and responsibly, to live in darkness rather than in light. Thus, according not only to Hebraic prophetism but also to all the other axial religions, human beings are universally in need of *ultimate transformation*, i.e., transformation from an inauthentic, because unrealistic misunderstanding of themselves to an authentic, because realistic self-understanding. What is wanted, they all attest, is an ultimate turning by each and every human being from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness, from love of self to love of reality as such.

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