

Niebuhr speaks again and again of both an original and a final unity, presumably corresponding to his characteristic way of thinking and speaking of God in specifically theological terms as “ground” and “fulfillment,” “creator” and “judge.” Thus he speaks of the ethical demands made by Jesus proceeding from “a transcendent and divine unity of essential reality,” even as he says that “the final fulfillment is possible only when God transmutes the present chaos of this world into its final unity” (*Reinhold Niebuhr on Politics*: 135).

I could, of course, speak in a roughly parallel way—following Whitehead and Hartshorne—of both the primordial unity that lies in God’s unification of all possibilities and of the consequent unity that lies in God’s unification of all actualities together with all possibilities. (In fact, I have spoken in almost exactly these terms in discussing Hartshorne’s comments on Radhakrishnan’s concept of “the pre-cosmic nature of God” and suggesting a counterpart concept of “the post-cosmic nature of God.”) But how would these two ways of speaking really be related?

That this question is pertinent is clear from the kinds of things Niebuhr says about the final fulfillment of ultimate meaning by “the full establishment of [divine] sovereignty,” and so on. What one always wants to know is just what he envisages such “fulfillment” or “full establishment” entailing—or, alternatively, in just what sense he expects God to “transmute” this world’s present chaos into its “final unity.” Does it entail, for example, realizing at last what he speaks of as “the social ideal implied by such disinterestedness [*sc.* the pure disinterestedness called for by Jesus’ ethical ideal],” i.e., “a combination of anarchism and communism dominated by a spirit of love” (133)? And what about the apparent implication of his statement that, because “Sin is overcome in principle but not in fact,” “Love must continue to be suffering rather than triumphant love” (135)? Does full establishment of divine sovereignty mean that God’s love will cease to be “suffering” because it will have then become “triumphant”?

Unless and until such questions as these can be answered (and I, for one, don’t see how they can be), it seems only sensible to assume that what Niebuhr is

talking about and what I am talking about—even if in verbally the same or similar terms—are really and significantly different.

12 August 2003