

Niebuhr evidently wishes to make two closely related, but distinct, claims that I, too, should wish to make, even if with certain qualifications.

(1) moral action is possible only on the basis of some religious faith, including faith in some god as the center and source of ultimate meaning; and

(2) moral action is possible only on the basis of prophetic religious faith in a God who is both the ground and the ultimate fulfillment of existence, and thus the creator and the judge of the world, in the sense that “every conceivable order in the historical world” is “the partial fruit of a deeper unity [ground, creator] and the promise of a more perfect harmony [fulfillment, judge] than is revealed in any immediate situation” (*Reinhold Niebuhr on Politics*: 131; Niebuhr adds, significantly, that without such a prophetic faith—or, as I should qualify, without a faith substantially identical with such a faith—“the world is seen either as being meaningless or as revealing unqualifiedly good and simple meanings. In either case the nerve of moral action is ultimately destroyed.”).

The first claim, I should say, is properly made by the philosophy of religion, the second, by philosophical theology—as well as, of course, by what might be called, in Niebuhr’s terms, “prophetic theology” (be it Christian, Jewish, Islamic, or what not). Where he seems to me to be unclear and uncertain, however, is at the point of the second claim—not because he questions whether philosophy as well as religion can create a universe of (ultimate) meaning in terms of which alone moral action is possible (he doesn’t at all deny this, as is clear, e.g., from 129), but because he sometimes says or implies things that at least appear to deny that philosophical theology, for its part, could ever in principle validate substantially the same faith proclaimed by “prophetic religion.”

12 August 2003