

I am aware of at least one place where Niebuhr employs a distinction between “the dispensation of providence” and “the dispensation of redemption” (*Reinhold Niebuhr on Politics*: 142). My question is how this distinction is to be understood in relation to his other, more familiar distinction between “common grace” and “saving grace.”

This question seems the more pertinent if one pays attention to some of the things he says about “grace” (without making or implying the second distinction). Thus, for example, he says, “[b]y ‘grace’ we must understand every force in life and history which persuades and beguiles self-centered man to forget himself and to realize himself by letting go of himself and seeking the good of his fellows” (71 f.). Or, again, he says, “[T]he ‘grace’ of God . . . is on the one hand the providential working in history by which God makes the wrath of man to praise him and transmutes good out of evil. The other element in divine grace is the element of forgiveness” (206). This second statement is not as helpful as it might be because the “on the other hand” one naturally expects in the second sentence is apparently replaced by “the other element,” which is similarly unhelpful because there’s no indication in what precedes it of any “element” than which it is “the other”! But it certainly looks as though Niebuhr’s meaning in the second sentence could have been more adequately expressed had he written something like, “On the other hand, divine grace is forgiveness, which can be accepted only by repentance.”

It seems, then, that what he means by “common grace” is simply the “merciful providence that makes us do good against our will and gives us a chance to serve mankind, even though we want to serve ourselves” (207), while what he means by “saving grace” is the grace of forgiveness. In other words, his distinction between the two kinds of grace parallels his distinction between “providence” and “forgiveness,” and so also that between “providence” and “redemption.”

On the other hand, it may be that, while “common grace” certainly includes the grace of providence, it is not exhausted thereby, because it also

includes the grace of forgiveness or redemption, albeit in a more general, or universal, sense than "saving grace," properly so-called (in the way in which one might expect a "hidden Christ" to mediate it). Since I know of nothing that Niebuhr says or implies that clearly rules out this alternative interpretation, I can only allow it as a possibility. But I more and more incline to interpret him differently, as meaning that his distinction between "common grace" and "saving grace" exactly parallels his other distinctions between "providence" and "forgiveness," on the one hand, and "providence" and "redemption," on the other.

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