

What Niebuhr has to say about “the most primitive religion,” or “the lowest religion,” on the one hand, and “the highest religion,” on the other, calls to mind Wittgenstein’s epigram contrasting superstition and faith (*Reinhold Niebuhr on Politics*: 128 f.).

“The most primitive religion,” Niebuhr says, “is magic; and magic is a kind of crude science which seeks to bend natural and cosmic forces to the human will.” Clearly, this converges very closely with what Wittgenstein understands by “superstition,” which he describes as “a kind of false science” springing from “fear.”

But, then, “the highest religion,” Niebuhr says, serves “a higher purpose”: “to bend the human will to the divine will, to discover the ultimate truth about life to which men ought to submit, whatever their inclinations” (= “the honest purpose of subjecting the individual will to the purposes of God”). Wittgenstein, by contrast, says of “faith” only that it is “a trusting,” which, of course, raises the question of the relation between such trusting and the “submission,” “subjection,” or obedience that Niebuhr takes to be demanded by high religion. I should say that they are so related that to trust what alone is genuinely trustworthy is the first act of obedience, even as its second act is to loyally serve what alone genuinely deserves to be served.

There is, however, a characteristically Niebuhrian note that needs very much to be heard. “The lowest religion,” Niebuhr says, “is never purely an effort to bend the world to human wishes; and the highest religion, in actual practice, mixes motives of self-glorification into the honest purpose of subjecting the individual will to the purposes of God.” We could presumably say in Wittgensteinian terms, *mutatis mutandis*, that no fear is completely lacking in trust, even as no trust, in actual practice, is ever wholly free of fear.

Other things Niebuhr’s way of putting the matter calls to mind are: Santayana’s distinction between natural and ultimate religion; Whitehead’s distinction between the religion for which God is the enemy and the religion for

which God is the companion; and—certainly not least—Hartshorne’s formulation of “the religious question” by asking, “Is the part for the whole, or the whole merely for the part?” For “there are two possibilities, and only two: . . . We must either serve, or be served by, the larger cosmos” (“The Modern World and a Modern View of God”: 3).

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