

Niebuhr's disavowal of being a theologian is characteristically perceptive.

Of course, he, too, engages, and has to engage, in theological thinking, properly so-called, in order to <sup>do</sup> what he primarily does—and is concerned to do. But he is preeminently a Christian preacher and teacher—and, in this sense, a Christian religious thinker, as distinct from a theologian *sensu stricto*.

In performing this function (or these functions), however, he is no less concerned with the apologetic task of Christian witness and theology than with their dogmatic task. On the contrary, he excels as precisely a Christian apologist, taking on all and sundry in order to vindicate the claim of Christianity to express the truth about human existence—and that not only or primarily theoretically (i.e., metaphysically) but also, and above all, practically (i.e., morally and politically). Thus when he argues, for example, that the theories and policies of idealists or optimists, on the one hand, and cynics or pessimists, on the other, are alike departures from the profundity of Christian faith, he also argues—vigorously and robustly—for the truth of Christian wisdom, in the sense of its correspondence to the experienced realities of human existence. Indeed, he insists on the importance of recognizing that the "lack of conformity to the facts of experience" is "a criterion of heresy" (*Christianity and Power Politics*: 6).

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