

On the face of it, Niebuhr might seem to hold something like the kind of Augustinian position that Wolterstorff admits to holding; i.e., he might seem to be saying that, given the standpoint of Christian faith, one proceeds to understand and interpret—not only, or even primarily, the content of faith itself, but also, and first of all, all other things, any other thing, from that faith standpoint.

My guess, however, is that this is not what Niebuhr means to say. On the contrary, his position is more likely close to his brother's in "Life Is Worth Living." That is, he wants to say that the answers to "the most profound questions of life," including the question of "belief," or of the meaning of life, as well as the questions of "knowledge" and "conduct," are not given by reason but by faith—the proper business of reason being to move faith, as the other Niebuhr says, from a relatively uncritical faith to a relatively critical one. Thus "the faith in meaning" is moved by reason "from the childlike faith which has been attacked [*sc.* by experience of life itself] to a critical yet firmer faith which knows that all the objects of devotion—home, country, and great causes—are insufficient of and in themselves" (4).

In any case, there is no question whatever that Niebuhr can and does use the concept "an act of faith" otherwise and more generally to mean something other than "an act of *Christian* faith." Thus he says, for example, that "the meaning which is given to the whole [*sc.* flow of historical events] is derived from an act of faith in the sense that the concept of meaning is derived from ultimate presuppositions about the character of time and eternity, which are not the fruit of detailed analyses of historical events" (*Reinhold Niebuhr on Politics*: 53).

Significantly, he goes on to allow that whether or not the ultimate presuppositions embraced by an act of faith constitute "an adequate framework" is "a question which can be approached rationally." I take it that by this he means the same sort of thing he expresses elsewhere by saying that "[t]here is a wisdom beyond human knowledge, but not contrary to human experience. Once known, the truth of the gospel explains our experiences which remain inexplicable on any other level" (*Christianity and Power Politics*: 214). Also noteworthy is his statement that, if metaphysics is defined

with Collingwood, as the analysis of presuppositions, then "we can come to terms with the adequacy of the total structure of meaning by metaphysical analyses" (*Reinhold Niebuhr on Politics*: 51).

I frankly doubt that everything Niebuhr says on this score is coherent; he is dealing too quickly with too many different aspects of the matter by use of the same concepts and distinctions. But I still see nothing in his position that would require him to invalidate mine. I do strongly suspect, however, that at least one aspect of the matter with which he is definitely trying to deal is that, once given faith, empirical observation discloses facts that illustrate, as Hartshorne says, or, in Niebuhr's own terms, "symbolize," the truth that, being a matter of "belief" in his brother's sense, can only be embraced by an act of faith and critically validated by metaphysical as well as ethical reflection.

2 July 1999