

Niebuhr is obviously sensitive to the dangers of a "religious ethic," including, for example, "the emphasis of modern dialectical theology upon the irrelevance of moral and social issues" (*An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*: 228). "It cannot be denied," he admits, "that such a faith [*sc.* that there is a transcendent perspective from which 'all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags'] is dangerous to morality. It may tempt men to blunt the sharpness of moral distinctions which must be made in human history. But it is as necessary as it is dangerous" (229 f.). On the other hand, he insists, "The victim of injustice cannot cease from contending against his oppressors, even if he has a religious sense of the relativity of all social positions and a contrite recognition of the sin in his own heart. . . . As long as men are involved in the conflicts of nature and sin they must seek according to best available moral insights to contend for what they believe to be right" (228 f.).

The difficulty, however, is that Niebuhr's characteristic way of trying to deal with this problem has the, no doubt wholly unintended, effect of exacerbating it. Thus he can say, "Forgiving love is a possibility only for those who . . . feel themselves as well as their fellow men convicted of sin by a holy God and know that the differences between the good man and the bad man are insignificant in [God's] sight" (226). But this is to say, in effect, that moral distinctions are ultimately insignificant—which comes so close to the pessimism of dualistic religions, such as Niebuhr (mis)takenly takes Buddhism, above all, to represent, as to make no difference. What is wanted, clearly, is a more "dialectical," or "paradoxical," formulation, according to which the same moral distinctions that, in one respect—namely, in respect of God's *essential nature and existence*—are "insignificant," are, in another respect—in respect of God's *accidental actuality*—"everlastingly significant." But, then, my earlier judgment is entirely sound that "the more fundamental problem of the One and the many, of monism and dualism, which runs throughout the whole of Christian theology. . . is to be solved only by a neoclassical conception of God" (*The Reality of God*: 228).

It occurs to me, in this connection, that, for all of his insistence on "the truth in myths," Niebuhr quite fails to do justice to the "individuality" of God, as distinct from God's "universality." Again and again, what he says about "God the creator and God the fulfillment of existence" (7; cf. 12: "the

ultimate ground of existence" and "its ultimate fulfillment"; 22: "the ground of existence " and "the guarantor of its fulfillment"; 26: "the transcendent source and end of existence") requires nothing more than the wholly absolute, merely abstract monopolar God of classical theism, whose work as creator consists in all created things' being, in their different ways, images or symbols, greater or lesser approximations, of his own transcendent unity; and whose work as fulfiller (and so also judge as well as redeemer) consists in nothing's exhaustively realizing, but only more or less imperfectly approximating, his transcendent perfection.

To be sure, Niebuhr can say that the image of God as the creator, which "transcends the canons of rationality," "expresses both his organic relation to the world and his distinction from the world" (26). But since Niebuhr nowhere, to my knowledge, ever takes account of the important logical-ontological difference between internal and external relations, what he means by "his [*sc.* God's] organic relation to the world" may really mean simply the world's organic (i.e., internal) relation to God (cf. 105). In any case, I know of no passage that expressly and unambiguously precludes taking this to be his meaning—including his statement that "the myth of creation offers . . . the firm foundation for a world view which sees the Transcendent involved in , but not identified with, the process of history" (22). Even if the transcendent's being involved in the process of history might be construed as implying the individuality/actuality of God, this certainly does not preclude its construal as, once again, asserting only God's universality (cf. 32, where, speaking of "the sacramentalism of Christian orthodoxy," Niebuhr says "every natural fact is rightly seen as an image of the transcendent, but wrongly covered so completely with the aura of sanctity as to obscure its imperfections").

Indeed, other ways in which Niebuhr regularly formulates his point, far from precluding such a construal, invite it as the more natural interpretation. Consider, for example, his use of the contrast between "the ideal and the real" in the following passage: "The significance of Hebrew-Christian religion lies in the fact that the tension between the ideal and the real which it creates can be maintained at any point in history, no matter what the moral and social achievement, because its ultimate ideal always transcends every historical fact and reality" (20).

Perhaps particularly revealing in this connection is the following passage: "In prophetic religion God, as creator and judge of the world, is both the unity which is the ground of existence and the ultimate unity, the good which is, to use Plato's phrase, on the other side of existence. In as far as the world exists at all it is good; for existence is possible only when chaos is overcome by unity and order. But the unity of the world is threatened by chaos, and its meaningfulness is always under the peril of meaninglessness. The ultimate confidence in the meaningfulness of life, therefore, rests upon a faith in the final unity, which transcends the world's chaos as certainly as it is basic to the world's order" (37 f.).

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