

Again and again, Niebuhr infers from the demonstrated inadequacy of alternative world views (optimism, pessimism, and so on) some such conclusion as that it is "necessary for our generation to return to the faith of prophetic Christianity to solve its problems" (*An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*: 98 f.). In point of fact, however, this is not the conclusion to which he is entitled—any more than I was entitled to conclude to the necessity of specifically Christian revelation in the way in which I tried to do in *On Theology*: 38-41. The only conclusion he is entitled to draw is that it is necessary for our generation to return to the more adequate world view expressed by prophetic Christianity, but—for all he shows to the contrary—also expressed, or, at least, expressible, in other ways and by other means. Indeed, it is arguable that a purely secular philosophy expressing the kind of world view that Niebuhr takes to be distinctive of "the faith of prophetic Christianity" would serve just as effectively, if not indeed more so, to solve our generation's problems, so far, at any rate, as they are at all soluble by an adequate world view, as distinct from any and all inadequate world views.

In any event, as true as it is that to be a Christian is to share in a certain world view or understanding of existence, the converse proposition is false—that to share in this certain world view is to be a Christian. Niebuhr seems to recognize this very point when he distinguishes between "the Christian faith's" being "merely a theory," on the one hand, and its being "a living and vital presupposition of life and conduct," on the other.

Two further comments:

(1) In certain passages (e.g., 33 f.), it seems clear that the terms of comparison that Niebuhr has in mind are not so much Christian faith, on the one hand, and all other faiths, religions, and world views, on the other, as, rather, an adequate or vital Christian faith, on the one hand, and all inadequate or decaying Christian views, on the other.

(2) Niebuhr is explicit in rejecting Christian exclusivism as well as, perhaps, Christian inclusivism. Thus he says, "Only it is not true that the grace which is added is necessarily infused by the sacraments nor even that the Christian faith is its only possible presupposition. The grace of God is not

confined so narrowly as theological defenders of historic religious institutions would like to confine it" (217).

25 June 1999