

It seems clear that what Niebuhr refers to as "an ideal possibility that people may hold ultimate religious convictions with a sufficient degree of humility to live amicably with those who have contradictory convictions" is closely related to what I mean by "the distinct alternative of recognizing the truth claim of the Christian religion to be exactly that—a claim—and of being willing to critically validate it through unrestricted dialogue and common inquiry, whenever it is rendered problematic by counterclaims to religious or existential truth" (*The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*: 130; OTR: 100 f.).

There does seem to be the difference that Niebuhr does not clearly see the place of "unrestricted dialogue and common inquiry" and does not explicitly accept "the possibility and the risk of Christians ceasing to be [Christians] in face of experiences and reasons that on the whole invalidate their claim instead of validating it." It is still possible, of course, that what he means by "an humble and contrite recognition of the fact that all actual expressions of religious faith are subject to historical contingency and relativity" (134) is substantially identical with what I mean by recognizing that the truth claim of the Christian religion or of any version thereof is exactly that—a claim that, under certain conditions, has to be critically validated. But whether or not this is, in fact, what he means turns upon whether or not he recognizes as clearly as I do that any religion, including the Christian religion and any version thereof, qualifies not as "religious faith" *simpliciter*, but only as one of the many "actual expressions" of religious faith that, as such, can and should be critically validated.

* * * * *

I entirely agree with Niebuhr that "[t]here is a religious solution of the problem of religious diversity" (*The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*: 134); and my understanding of what that solution is clearly seems to converge with his. But I wonder whether he is as clear as I think I am about the necessary presupposition of such a solution—namely, that one conceive the true religion in relation to all actual religions analogously to the way in which an adequate ecclesiology conceives the true (i.e., visible) church in

relation to all actual (i.e., institutional) churches: as identical with none of them, but as subsisting in all of them insofar as they express, in one way or another, the same self-understanding/understanding of existence, i.e., meaning of ultimate reality for us, necessarily implied by the structure of ultimate reality in itself.

* * * * *

I am struck by the extent to which Niebuhr's thought is determined very much as mine is by the distinction between part(s) and whole. In many places, he makes the distinction explicitly in these very terms—as when he says "evil is always the assertion of some self-interest without regard to the whole, whether the whole be conceived as the immediate community, or the total community of mankind, or the total order of the world. The good is, on the other hand, always the harmony of the whole on various levels" (*The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*: 9; cf. 67). In other places, the same distinction appears in his contrast between "the partial" and "the universal," which parallels his distinction between "the immediate" and "the ultimate." Thus, speaking of reason, he says, "Reason, like idolatrous religion, does not simply subordinate the immediate to the ultimate and the partial to the universal. Its effect is always partly to give the immediate the prestige of the absolute [*sic!*] and to veil the partial behind the universal" ("Religion and Action": 7). Or, again, he says, "Sin is not the inertia of the partial against the claims of the universal. . . . Sin is not expressed in the fact that no man is universal man but American man or bourgeois man or western man. Sin is revealed in the fact that western man, or bourgeois man or American man refuses to admit the partiality of his viewpoints and the contingent character of his existence" (10). "Every effort on [man's] part to [extricate himself from his situation] actually involves him more deeply in sin, since every such effort will merely insinuate the partial and particular perspective of finite man into the concept of the universal or the eternal which he projects" (10).

7 June 1999