

I am frankly put off by Niebuhr's distinction of "high religions" into "culture religion(s)," on the one hand, and "religion of revelation or prophetic religion," on the other. I object to such a distinction because it is, on the face of it, self-serving, since any so-called religion of revelation or prophetic religion is, from a purely objective historical or philosophical standpoint, as much a form of human culture as any so-called culture religion, while any so-called culture religion is, from its own subjective standpoint, authorized by some revelation or the functional equivalent thereof.

Even so, there may be a valid point to Niebuhr's distinction, given the way he characterizes "culture religions." Such religions, he says, "seek by some discipline of heart or mind to extricate the soul and mind from the welter of passion and the conflicts of nature and history in which they are involved. Both types of culture religion are united in their belief that the conflict of interest and the chaos of human action are due to the self's involvement in the passions and necessities of nature. Both derive the evil in human history not from the freedom of the human spirit but from the inertia of man's physical nature. Both define the religious task as the extrication of the self from its involvement in nature by some internal discipline, whether rational or mystical, so that it will achieve perfect harmony or even identity with the eternal and transcendent realm o[r] source of meaning, with God" ("Religion and Action": 4).

Judging from this characterization, one could say that culture religions—mystical or rational, pessimistic or optimistic—are schemes of self-salvation, of disciplining human life in such a way as to overcome its involvement in nature and history. As such, they take the extrication of the self from its predicament to be an—indeed, *the*—achievement of the self itself—a matter, therefore, in terms of Paul's distinction, of "one's own righteousness," rather than "the righteousness of God." On the other hand, religion of revelation or prophetic religion takes the extrication of the self from its predicament to be an achievement, not of the self's discipline of itself, but of God's grace and therefore a matter precisely of "God's righteousness," not one's own. Of course, as Niebuhr rightly insists, grace is a corollary of original sin and has meaning only in relation to it. But this

means, of course, that the understanding of the human predicament in a religion of revelation is, in principle, different from that of a culture religion—just as Niebuhr says it is.

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