

Niebuhr argues that "pessimistic culture religions have no solution for the historical problem of man. They merely negate history. The optimistic versions [sc. of culture religion] betray us into utopian illusions, which historical reality consistently disappoints" ("Religion and Action": 8). But just what does Niebuhr mean by "the historical problem of man"?

My guess is that he means, finally, what he speaks of elsewhere as "the problem of justice," or "the task of achieving justice"—these phrases being used to refer to one and the same thing (*Christianity and Power Politics*: 51, 56). Or, again, he means what he speaks of as "the political problem and task" (4). In another place, he distinguishes "the ultimate questions about the meaning of life" from "the immediate problem of the unity and harmony of our society"—the latter being, I believe, yet another phrase equivalent in meaning to "the historical problem of man" (*The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*: 134). Thus he can say that "the creation of community in world dimensions" is "the ultimate social problem of human history" (188).

Also relevant to an answer, I think, is Niebuhr's statement that "human society is a vast moral and historical artifact, which would be destroyed if natural conflicts and contests between various vitalities were not mitigated, managed and arbitrated. Both the intensity and the breadth of social cohesion have been historically created" (65).

I say that this is what he "finally" means, however, because "the historical problem of man" may very well also include what he can speak of as "the problem of truth" as well as "the problem of righteousness" (*Christianity and Power Politics*: 221; cf. 219; also 216, where he speaks of "all those social tasks which constantly confront the life of men and nations" and of "the burdens of immediate situations in which men are involved").

5 June 1999