

Niebuhr, in his way, evidently presupposes that the question to which religion, including the Christian religion, is addressed is what I call "the existential question," i.e., the question about the meaning of human life. Thus he says in one place that "it is the business of religion" to find "the meaningfulness of the universe" (or, possibly, "the very guarantee" of such meaningfulness) (*Christianity and Power Politics*: 184). In another, he says that "[h]uman vitality has two primary sources, animal impulse and confidence in the meaningfulness of human existence. The more human consciousness arises to full self-consciousness and to a complete recognition of the total forces of the universe in which it finds itself, the more it requires not only animal vitality but confidence in the meaningfulness of its world to maintain a healthy will-to-live. This confidence in the meaningfulness of life is not something which results from a sophisticated analysis of the forces and factors which surround the human enterprise. It is something which is assumed in every healthy life. It is primary religion. Men may be quite unable to define the meaning of life, and yet live by a simple trust that it has meaning. This primary religion is the basic optimism of all vital and wholesome human life" (177 f.).

Clearly, what Niebuhr here calls "primary religion," i.e., "confidence" or "trust" that life has meaning, is what I call "basic confidence in the meaning of life." And this becomes all the clearer when, only two sentences later, he tacitly takes religion to be a matter of "loyalty" as well as of "confidence" or "trust" (cf. also 204 f., where the "god" of a religion is said to be "the object of its unconditioned loyalty").

Or, again, his account of how religion develops from the "primitive," or primordial, stage of totemism and animism to the stage of "profound religion" (by which I take him to mean something very like my "axial religion") exactly parallels mine. That is, it is an account in which the generating insight is, in his words, that "the simple faith and optimism of primitive man did not exist long without being challenged. The world is not only a cosmos but a chaos. Every universe of meaning is constantly threatened by meaninglessness. Its self-sufficiency is challenged by larger and more inclusive worlds. The more men think the more they are tempted to pessimism because their thought surveys the worlds which lie beyond their

little cosmos, and analyzes the chaos, death, destruction and misery which seem to deny their faith in the harmony and meaningfulness of their existence in it. All profound religion is an effort to answer the challenge of pessimism. It seeks a center of meaning in life which is able to include the totality of existence, and which is able to interpret the chaos as something which only provisionally threatens its cosmos and can ultimately be brought under its dominion" (179). Thus "[a]n adequate religion is always an ultimate optimism which has entertained all the facts which lead to pessimism. Its optimism is based upon faith in a transcendent center of meaning which is never fully expressed in any partial value and is never exhausted in any concrete historical reality. But though it is not exhausted in any such reality it is incarnated there. Like the human personality in the human body, it lives in and through the body, but transcends it" (182 f.). By contrast, "a superficial [and therefore inadequate] religion" discovers "a meaningful world without having discovered the perils to meaning in death, sin, and catastrophe" (185). "[E]very religion which imparts a superficial meaning to life, and grounds that meaning in a dubious sanctity, finally issues in despair. Those who make the family their god must despair when the family is proved to be only a little less mortal than the individual. Those who make a god of their nation must despair when the might of their nation crumbles, as every creaturely and sinful might must: 'For we are consumed by thine anger and by thy wrath are we troubled'" (212).

Significantly, Niebuhr also employs his concept of religion as though it were the same kind of "strictly functional," nonsubstantive concept that I represent my own concept as being. Thus he says, "Strictly speaking, there is no such thing as secularism. An explicit denial of the sacred always contains some implied affirmation of a holy sphere. . . . There are no irreligious cultures; and if there were, it could not be assumed that a religious culture is intrinsically superior to an irreligious one. The question is not whether we worship a god. That is not the question, on the one hand, because all men do, whether implicitly or explicitly; and on the other hand, the worship of false gods is in no sense preferable to complete agnosticism, if the latter were possible" (204 f.).

Niebuhr's view further closely parallels mine in his insistence that particular religions, including the Christian religion, have "to do justice to all the facts of life," and therefore that "lack of conformity to the facts of experience" is a criterion—if not of "heresy," as he claims, then certainly—of the adequacy (also his term!), and, more exactly, the credibility of a religious faith (182, 6). "All forms of religious faith are principles of interpretation which we use to organize our experience. Some religions may be adequate principles of interpretation at certain levels of experience, but they break down at deeper levels. No religious faith can maintain itself in defiance of the experience which it supposedly interprets" (6).

To be sure, Niebuhr sometimes seems to waver on the question of whether any religion that thus functions to interpret experience is itself also derived from and expressive of experience. Thus he says in one place, "Every explanation of the meaning of human existence must avail itself of some principle of explanation [cf. principle of interpretation] which cannot be explained. Every estimate of values involves some criterion of value which cannot be arrived at empirically" (204). In much the same vein, he also says that "the wisdom of God" known to Christian faith "is a wisdom beyond human knowledge, but not contrary to human experience. Once known, the truth of the gospel explains our experiences which remain inexplicable on any other level. Through it we are able to understand life in all of its beauty and its terror, without being beguiled by its beauty or driven to despair by its terror" (214). Likewise, he can insist that "reason cannot function without the presuppositions of faith" and that "every search for truth begins with a presupposition of faith" (220, 221). Perhaps such statements amount to a denial that any religion functions to interpret experience—more or less adequately—only because it itself is derived from experience as well as subject to it as a criterion. Certainly, they have been so interpreted often enough by other interpreters. My guess, however, is that they can—and should—all be interpreted as not really inconsistent with my view. Given something like my distinctions between the "existential" and the "empirical" aspects of experience and between "basic confidence," on the one hand, and any particular religious re-presentation of it, on the other, one can agree with everything Niebuhr says without taking it to amount to such a denial. Thus, for example, "the presupposition(s) of faith" that he takes to be essential to

reason need not be construed as "the presupposition(s) of *Christian* faith," but may be taken instead to refer to "the presupposition(s)" of "primary religion," or basic confidence in the meaning of life.

By the way, Niebuhr's frequent statements asserting or implying the severe limitations of reason in developing an adequate world view seem to me similarly interpretable, at least if one also allows for his tendency sometimes to overstate his point. Thus he says, for example, "Reason always has difficulty with an adequate view of transcendence and immanence. It inclines either to reduce it to a complete dualism or to a complete monism. As a result it expresses a world view which is either too pessimistic or too optimistic to do justice to all the facts of life" (182). Or, again, "Purely rationalistic interpretations of life and existence easily make one of two mistakes. They either result in idealistic or pantheistic sanctifications of historic reality, in which the given is appreciated too uncritically to allow for a protest against its imperfections, or they degenerate into dualism, in which the world of concrete reality is relegated to the realm of the unredeemed and unredeemable" (199). It is in this connection, then, that Niebuhr expresses his preference for myth and for paradox: "The difficulty of bringing God's omnipotence into consistent relation with his goodness has engaged all ages of religious thought. But the most adequate religion solves its problems in paradoxes rather than schemes of consistency, and has never wavered in believing that God is both the ground of our existence and the ultimate pinnacle of perfection toward which existence tends" (197). But here, too, I see no necessary conflict between Niebuhr's view and mine. What does the history of philosophical theism show if not a craving for simplicity that has again and again yielded oversimplifications of complexities more adequately expressed, in certain respects, by the myths philosophy sought to rationalize?

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