

## NIEBUHR ON REVELATION—WITH COMMENTARY

"The revelation of God to man is always a twofold one, a personal-individual revelation, and a revelation in the context of social-historical experience. Without the public and historical revelation [*sc.* the revelation in the context of social-historical experience] the private experience of God [*sc.* the personal-individual revelation] would remain poorly defined and subject to caprice. Without the private revelation of God, the public and historical revelation would not gain credence. Since all men have, in some fashion, the experience of a reality beyond themselves, they are able to entertain the more precise revelations of the character and purpose of God as they come to them in the most significant experiences of prophetic history. Private revelation is, in a sense, synonymous with 'general' revelation, without the presuppositions of which there could be no 'special' revelation [*sc.* public and historical revelation/ revelation in the context of social-historical experience]. It [*sc.* private revelation] is no less universal for being private. Private revelation is the testimony in the consciousness of every person that his life touches a reality beyond himself, a reality deeper and higher than the system of nature in which he stands.

"St. Paul speaks of this experience of God when he declares that even without a further revelation men are 'without excuse' if they do not glorify God as God but become vain in their imagination and make themselves God (Romans 1:20). The experience of God is not so much a separate experience, as an overtone implied in all experience. The soul which reaches the outermost rims of its own consciousness, must also come in contact with God, for He impinges upon that consciousness.

"Schleiermacher describes this experience of God as the experience of 'unqualified dependence.' This is one of its aspects but not its totality. It is one of its aspects because there is, in all human consciousness, at least a dim recognition of the insufficient and dependent character of all finite [*sc.* fragmentary] life, a recognition which implies the consciousness of the reality upon which dependent existence depends. [But a]n equally important characteristic of the experience of God is the sense of being seen, commanded, judged and known from beyond ourselves. . . .

"The experience so described is in some sense identical or associated with what is usually called 'conscience.' . . . The significance of the Biblical interpretation of conscience lies precisely in this, that a universal human experience, the sense of being commanded, placed under obligation and judged is interpreted as a relation between God and man in which it is God who makes demands and judgments upon man. Such an interpretation of a common experience is not possible without the presuppositions of Biblical faith. But once accepted the assumption proves [*sc.* the presuppositions prove] to be the only basis of a correct analysis of all the factors involved in the experience; for it is a fact that man is judged and yet there is no vantage point in his own life, sufficiently transcendent, from which the judgment can take place. . . .

"It might be argued that the content of a personal experience which can be defined only through the aid of a more historical revelation of the nature of the divine, which enters this experience, while this historical revelation can gain credence only if the personal experience is presupposed, is so involved in a logical circle as to become incredible. But the fact is that all human knowledge is also so involved. All common human experience requires more than the immediate experience to define the character of the object of experience. The reality of the object of experience is not in question, but the exact nature of the reality touched is not clear until it is defined by insights which transcend the immediate perception of the object. If the reality touched is something more than a mere 'object' but is itself subject, that is, if its character cannot be fully revealed to us, except as it takes the initiative, the principle of interpretation must be something more than the merely general principles of knowledge which illumine a particular experience. The principle of interpretation must be a 'revelation.'

"Our approach to other human personalities offers an illuminating analogy of the necessity and character of 'revelation' in our relation to God. We have various evidence that, when dealing with persons, we are confronting a reality of greater depth than the mere organism of animal life. We have evidence that we are dealing with a 'Thou' of such freedom and uniqueness that a mere external observation of its behaviour will not only leave the final essence of that person obscure but will actually falsify it, since such observation would debase what is really free subject into a mere object. This person, this other 'Thou' cannot

be understood until he speaks to us; until his behaviour is clarified by the 'word' which comes out of the ultimate and transcendent unity of his spirit. Only such a word can give us the key by which we understand the complexities of his behaviour. This word spoken from beyond us and to us is both a verification of a belief that we are dealing with a different dimension than animal existence; and also a revelation of the actual and precise character of the person with whom we are dealing.

"In the same [*sc.* an analogous] way, the God whom we meet as 'The Other' at the final limit of our own consciousness, is not fully known to us except as specific revelations of His character augment this general experience of being confronted from beyond ourselves.

"In Biblical faith these specific revelations are apprehended in the context of a particular history of salvation in which specific historical events become special revelations of the character of God and of His purposes. Without the principle of interpretation furnished by this 'special revelation' the general experience or the general revelation involved in conscience becomes falsified, because it is explained merely as a man facing the court of social approval or disapproval or as facing his own 'best self'. . . . But this conclusion is at variance with the actual facts of the human situation, for there is no level of moral achievement upon which man can have or actually has an easy conscience.

"The fact that a culture which identifies God with some level of human consciousness, either rational or super-rational, or with some order of nature, invariably falsifies the human situation and fails to appreciate either the total stature of freedom in man or the complexity of the problem of evil in him, is the most telling negative proof for the Biblical faith. Man does not know himself truly except as he knows himself confronted by God. Only in that confrontation does he become aware of his full stature and freedom and of the evil in him. It is for this reason that Biblical faith is of such importance for the proper understanding of man, and why it is necessary to correct the interpretations of human nature which underestimate his stature, depreciate his physical existence and fail to deal realistically with the evil in human nature, in terms of Biblical faith" (*NDM*, 1: 127-131).

*Commentary*—All of the above, read as I've indicated it should be read, converges with my own understanding of revelation and, in some ways, significantly augments it. The one big problem I have with it is the same problem I have with Niebuhr's arguments generally—namely, that it veers off into a self-serving apologetic that claims for Christianity, or "the Biblical faith," what can, in fact, be claimed, more or less convincingly, for any axial religion—for which "the infinite qualitative difference" is (in some terms or other) acknowledged and "the real problem" of human existence and history is rightly diagnosed as not "finiteness" (*sc.* "fragmentariness"), but, rather, radical self-*mis*understanding, an understanding for which fragmentariness is either ignored or denied by sin, ignorance, or what not. That "the actual facts of the human situation" are indeed falsified except when viewed in terms of the presuppositions of axial religion (and transcendental metaphysics/ethics) is, in my opinion, as in Niebuhr's, almost certainly true. But that this is *ipso facto* even a "negative proof" for "the Biblical faith" specifically as such seems to me to claim more than can fairly be claimed—even if it should prove to be the case that the "presuppositions" of biblical faith—which is to say, the transcendental metaphysics/ethics that it, along with other axial religions, necessarily presupposes—do in fact provide a more adequate account of our common human experience than any of the relevant alternatives.

\* \* \* \* \*

"The general revelation of personal human experience, the sense of being confronted with a 'wholly other' at the edge of human consciousness, contains three elements, two of which are not too sharply defined, while the third is not defined at all. The first is the sense of reverence for a majesty and of dependence upon an ultimate source of being. The second is the sense of moral obligation laid upon one from beyond oneself and of moral unworthiness before a judge. The third, most problematic of the elements in religious experience, is the longing for forgiveness. All three of these elements become more sharply defined as they gain the support of other forms of revelation [*sc.* especially special revelation]. The first, the sense of dependence upon a reality greater and more

ultimate than ourselves, gains the support of another form of 'general' revelation, the content of which is expressed in the concept of the Creator and the creation. Faith [*What* faith? Biblical faith? Christian faith? the faith made possible by the work of the "hidden Christ" ? Or? (2: 109 f., n. 6; 123; 208)] concludes that the same "Thou" who confronts us in our personal experience is also the source and Creator of the whole world. The second element in personal religion [*sc.* private revelation/general revelation], the experience of judgment, gains support from the prophetic-Biblical concept of judgment in history. The whole of history is seen as validation of the truth in the personal experience that God stands over against us as our judge. The third element, the longing for reconciliation after this judgment (and it must be regarded provisionally as a longing rather than an assurance), becomes the great issue of the Old Testament interpretation of life. The question is: is God merciful as well as just? And if He is merciful, how is His mercy related to His justice? This is the question which hovers over the whole of Biblical religion. Because Christian faith believes the final answer to this ultimate question to be given in Christ, it regards the revelation in Christ [as] a final revelation, beyond which there can be no further essential revelation. For this reason it speaks of Christ 'as the express image of his person.' Here the whole depth and mystery of the divine are finally revealed.

"In these three types of revelation God becomes specifically defined as Creator, Judge, and Redeemer. It is significant that each term represents a definition of divine transcendence in increasingly specific and sharply delineated terms; and yet in each the relation of God to the world is preserved" (131 f.).

*Commentary*—Had Niebuhr reckoned more seriously with God as the One not only *from* and *through* whom, but also *for*, or *to*, whom are all things, he might have realized that the longing for forgiveness, or reconciliation, is, in point of fact, a special case that, in its general principle, is as firmly grounded in personal/private/general revelation as either of the other two elements is. Also, can't all that Niebuhr says about "the great issue of the Old Testament interpretation of life" be taken into account by arguing, as I do, that the issue resolved by specifically Christian revelation is the issue of whether God's love is a conditional or an unconditional love?

\* \* \* \* \*

"We have previously observed that God as Creator upon whom all life depends and God as Judge who stands over against man is not unknown to each individual in terms of that 'general' revelation which is mediated by common human experience. We have also noted that the longing, though not the assurance, of forgiveness and reconciliation is a part of this common experience. The assurance of faith [*sc.* Christian faith] that the nature and character of God are such that He has resources of love and redemption transcending His judgments, is not something which may be known in terms of 'general' revelation. It is the most distinctive content of special revelation. It must be observed that, once this character of God is apprehended in terms of special revelation, common human experience can validate it" (143).

*Commentary*—Statements of just this kind explain—and justify—my interpretation of Niebuhr's understanding of revelation in *On Theology*: 33. The sufficient response to his argument, I take it, is that if common human experience can validate special revelation, as he claims it can, then what special revelation reveals can and must be something that *may* (and *can*) be known "in terms of 'general' revelation."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Hebraic prophetism . . . is the beginning of revelation because here, for the first time, in the history of culture the eternal and divine is not regarded as the extension and fulfillment of the highest human possibilities, whether conceived in particularistic or universalistic terms. God's word is spoken *against* both [H]is favored nation and against all nations. This means that prophetism has the first understanding of the fact that the real problem of history is not the finiteness [*sc.* fragmentariness] of all human endeavors, which must wait for their completion by divine power. The real problem of history is the proud pretension of all human endeavors which seeks to obscure their finite and partial [*sc.* fragmentary] character and thereby involves history in evil and sin.

"When a word of God is spoken not only against a nation, but against all nations, because they are all involved in pride and injustice, human culture as an enterprise which seeks to comprehend the meaning of life and history from any or all human perspectives is transcended. Here revelation, with its correlate of faith, begins. The correlate is faith, because prophetism, unlike mysticism, does not make the effort to find the eternal and divine, which has eluded it in history, in some deeper level of human consciousness. It apprehends a divine word of judgment, spoken against the whole human enterprise, by faith. It can only be by faith because man can transcend himself sufficiently to know that an ultimate word may be spoken against him; but he cannot himself speak that word" (2: 25 f.).

*Commentary*—Here, again, Niebuhr claims more than he has shown, ignoring the fact that, by his own principle, not only "Hebraic prophetism," but also any other axial religion, could be reasonably designated—formally if not materially—"the beginning of revelation." Beyond that, he misstates the real issue, which is not that human beings cannot, in general, speak the word against them, or state the end of human history, but rather that—in his own terms—"the self in action" fails to live up to the truth always already disclosed to (and also more or less adequately expressed by) "the self in contemplation."

\* \* \* \* \*

"The correlate of revelation is faith. The mutual relation between the two is so close that revelation cannot be completed without faith. The revelation of God in Christ, the disclosure of God's sovereignty over life and history, the clarification of the meaning of life and history, is not completed until man is able, by faith, to apprehend the truth which is beyond his apprehension without faith. The truth is not completely beyond his apprehension; otherwise Christ could not have been expected. It is nevertheless beyond his apprehension, or Christ would not have been rejected. It is a truth capable of apprehension by faith; but when so apprehended there is a consciousness in the heart of the believer that he has been helped to this apprehension" (52).

*Commentary*—This is too simplistic if unfaith or sin, no less than faith, is rightly understood as a correlate of, or a response to, revelation. The correlate of revelation is more correctly said to be self-understanding—the inauthentic mode of self-understanding properly called "sin" being, in its way, as much a response to, and in that sense a correlate of, revelation as the authentic mode properly called "faith" is, in its way.

\* \* \* \* \*

"When [the] word of revelation is spoken it completes incomplete knowledge, in so far as human history is a realm of reality having its final basis in eternity. . . . Secondly, the word of revelation clarifies obscurities and contradictions in history. . . . Finally, the 'word' of God corrects falsifications which have been introduced into the human interpretations of life's meaning by reason of man's effort to explain history from the standpoint of himself as the center. In that sense the word of revelation stands in contradiction to human culture and is 'foolishness' to the wise.

"But precisely because it is such foolishness, transcending human wisdom, it becomes, once accepted, the basis for a satisfactory total explanation of life. It becomes truly wisdom. Revelation does not remain in contradiction to human culture and human knowledge. By completing the incompleteness, clarifying the obscurities and correcting the falsifications of human knowledge it becomes true wisdom to 'them that are called'"(67).

*Commentary*—The question, of course, is whether "true wisdom" is true *only* because it is true to, or *for*, "them that are called." If it is, then the distinction between *being* true and *being accepted as* true is collapsed, violating the "deep" grammar of "true." If, on the contrary, "true wisdom" isn't true only because it's accepted as such, then why is it true, unless because it is somehow confirmed (and ever *to be* confirmed!) by common human experience and critical reflection thereon?



\* \* \* \* \*

"[The Christian] interpretation of the possibilities and limits of history is the fruit of natural experience and a natural (rational) analysis of experience. For any rigorous examination of the problems of man in nature-history clearly reveals that history points beyond itself and that it does so by reason of the freedom and transcendence of the human spirit. It is never completely contained in, or satisfied by, the historical-natural process, no matter to what level this process may rise.

"But this interpretation is the fruit of faith and revelation in so far as there is no experience which points irrefutably to the particular divine ground and end of history which Christian faith discerns in Christ and the Cross. In the realm of ethics as in the realm of truth, the revelation of Christ is foolishness, in the sense that experience does not lead us to expect or anticipate the answer which it makes to the ethical problem. But it is 'wisdom to them that are called' in the sense that, once accepted, it becomes an adequate principle for interpreting the ethical problem in history. It is the only principle of interpretation which does justice to the two factors in the human situation: Man's involvement in natural process, including the imperative character of his natural impulse of survival; and his transcendence over natural process, including his uneasy conscience over the fact that the survival impulse should play so dominant a role in all his ethical calculations" (96 f.).

*Commentary*—Aside from the presence here, too, of the self-serving apologetic that claims for Christianity, or the biblical faith, in particular what—for all that he shows to the contrary—is the common inheritance of the axial religions in general, Niebuhr again fallaciously argues as though the adequacy of the principle of Christian faith's interpretation were a function of its being accepted as adequate instead of its doing greater justice to "the two factors in the human situation" actually experienced and requiring to be interpreted.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Every facet of the Christian revelation, whether of the relation of God to history, or of the relation of man to the eternal, points to the impossibility of man fulfilling the true meaning of his life and reveals sin to be primarily derived from [*sc.* to consist primarily in] his abortive efforts to do so. The Christian gospel nevertheless enters the world with the proclamation that in Christ both 'wisdom' and 'power' are available to man; which is to say that not only has the true meaning of life been disclosed but also that resources have been made available to fulfill that meaning. In Him the faithful find not only 'truth' but 'grace'" (98).

*Commentary*—Niebuhr's distinction between "wisdom and "power," "truth" and "grace," evidently closely parallels mine between "entitling" and "empowering." But why is it, exactly, that "in Christ both 'wisdom' and 'power' are available to man"? Is it simply because "the faithful" find them in him, or is it also, and, in the first instance, because they are there in him to be found, i.e., because there is an exact correspondence between the self-understanding / understanding of existence decisively authorized by Christ (i.e., Jesus *as* the Christ) and the meaning of ultimate reality for us originally, if only implicitly, authorized by ultimate reality itself through common human experience and therefore confirmable by any adequate transcendental metaphysics/ethics?

\* \* \* \* \*

"In Christian faith Christ mediates the confrontation of the self by God; for it is in Christ that the vague sense of the divine, which human life never loses, is crystallized into a revelation of a divine mercy and judgment. In that revelation fear of judgment and hope of mercy are so mingled that despair induces repentance and repentance hope.

"While Christians rightly believe that all truth necessary for such a spiritual experience is mediated only through the revelation in Christ, they must guard against the assumption that only those who know Christ 'after the flesh,' that is, in the actual historical revelation, are capable of such a conversion. A 'hidden Christ' operates in history. And there is always the possibility that those who do not know the historical revelation may achieve a more genuine

repentance and humility than those who do. If this is not kept in mind the Christian faith easily becomes a new vehicle of pride" (109 f.).

*Commentary*—As right as Niebuhr seems to me to be about his main point here, I miss a very much needed clarification of the exact relation between "the revelation in Christ," on the one hand, and "the actual historical revelation"/ "the actual revelation," on the other (cf. also 123, where he expressly associates "the 'hidden Christ'" with "a grace which is not fully known which initiates the miracle [sc. of "infinite possibilities of organizing life from beyond the centre of the self," which possibilities, he says, are "always fruits of grace"]; and 208, where he speaks of "the freedom of divine grace in history, working miracles without any 'by your leave' of priest or church."). My guess is that what he intends to say converges very closely with what I, too, want to say. But, surely, it is better said by distinguishing, somewhat as I do, between the meaning of ultimate reality for us, on the one hand, and the Jesus through whom Christians attest this meaning to be decisively re-presented, on the other

\* \* \* \* \*

"[T]he revelation of God in Christ is on the one hand an historical focus of the divine, through which the mystery of the divine becomes morally and socially relevant to human nature, involved in finiteness and unable to comprehend the eternal. On the other hand it is the unique character of the revelation of God in Christ that it makes the divine and eternal known in history without giving any particular or partial force, value or vitality of history a sanctity or triumph which its finite and imperfect character does not deserve" (112).

*Commentary*—Again, Yes! But the necessary condition of the possibility of validating Niebuhr's claim for "the unique character of the revelation of God in Christ" is a consistently representativist, nonconstitutivist christology. And whether, or to what extent, he can be said to have such a christology is not as clear as one could wish it were.

\* \* \* \* \*

"[H]uman self-esteem resists the truth of the Christian gospel almost as vigorously within the bounds of a faith which has ostensibly accepted it, as it was resisted by the pre-Christian ages. They expected a Christ but not the Christ who would vindicate God in his justice and mercy without including any man in the vindication. The Christian ages seek a new way of vindicating men who have become righteous through Christ. . . .

"The favourite strategy for denying the perennial character of the contradiction between the human and the divine is to interpret the revelation of God in Christ as the disclosure of the eternal in history resulting in a consequent translation of the believer from the historical and temporal to the eternal. Such a redemption involves the apprehension of the eternal truth; and this knowledge of the truth also presumably guarantees the realization of it in life; in other words, the achievement of perfection.

"It is well to recognize at the outset that the perennial revolt in the Christian ages against the whole truth of the Christian gospel is the cause of the fanaticisms and religiously sanctified imperial lusts which have disfigured the history of Western civilization. In this revolt the invariable strategy is to set one part of the Christian truth against the whole of it. This revolt explains why a civilization, informed by a religious faith, which, alone among the faiths of the world, both encouraged historic creativity and responsibility and yet set the limits upon man's historic possibilities, must appear from the perspective of the more earthbound (Confucianism) and the more world-denying (Buddhism) religions of the East as a civilization of unbridled ambitions and heaven-storming passions.

"This does not mean that the corruption of Christian truth by human self-esteem could have been avoided if this or that theological tendency had not gained ascendancy, in this or that epoch. . . . It must be regarded as inevitable that a religion which apprehends the truth about man and God by faith alone should be used as the instrument of human arrogance. This is done whenever the truth which is held by faith, because it is beyond all human attainment, comes to be regarded as a secure possession. In this form it is no longer a threat to man. It

does not mediate judgment upon the false and imperial completions of human life. It becomes, rather, the vehicle of the pretension that the finiteness and sin of life have been overcome" (127 ff.).