

1. To what extent can one take account of some of the points made on a more conventional understanding of divine providence and judgment in history—such as, for instance, “the rise and fall of empires and civilizations”—by acknowledging an *analogical* as well as a literal use of such terms as “providence” and “judgment”? According to Niebuhr, “the vast variety of historical organisms, the richness of their elaborations of human potentialities, the wealth of their many cultural forms and social configurations are as certainly a testimony to the divine providence under which they have grown, as their destruction is a vindication of the eternal judgment, which they are unable to defy with impunity” (NDM 2:305). So far as I can see, this could hardly be meaningfully claimed if “providence” and “judgment” are used in their strict literal (metaphysical) senses. But I see no reason to deny that it might be meaningfully claimed if these terms were taken more broadly or analogically—in which case the achievements and destructions of world history would be analogues or pictures, as it were, of the final achievement and destruction which is God’s “proper work.” At the crux here is what Niebuhr himself recognizes as “the paradoxical relation of the individual to the historical process.” On the one hand, “the individual faces the eternal in every moment and in every action of his life; and he confronts the end of history with his own death. . . . On the other hand the individual’s life is meaningful only in its organic relation to historical communities, tasks and obligations” (2:312).

2. Niebuhr’s “dialectical conception of time and eternity” (2:289) strikes me as problematic. For while it is certainly proper to speak of “an eternity involved in, and yet transcending, the temporal (2:290), or of “an eternal ground of existence which is, nevertheless, involved in man’s historical striving to the very point of suffering with and for him” (2:321), it seems to me rather more problematic to speak of “a consummation which will sublimate [*sic*: sublate?] rather than annul the whole historical process” (2:298). For the idea of “sublimation,” like the notion that the “fulfillment” of things consists in “the fuller embodiment of their essential character” (287), appears to trade on the monism implicit in traditional Western philosophy generally, and in modern idealism in particular. Otherwise put, Niebuhr does not seem to allow

sufficiently for “the infinite *qualitative* difference” between time and eternity; instead of being radically discontinuous, time and eternity, as he thinks and speaks of them, seem to lie on the same level or plane. His motives in this are transparent—and sound: to take man’s “historical responsibilities” or “historical obligations” seriously, and thus to insist that the individual has an “indirect” as well as a “direct” relation to eternity. But I question whether his way of doing this is adequate. Consider, e.g., his statement: “A Christ is expected wherever history is thought of as a realm of fragmentary revelations of a purpose and power transcending history, pointing to a fuller disclosure of that purpose and power” (2:5). Note the quantitative language (“fuller disclosure,” “fragmentary revelations”). To be sure, Niebuhr also says: “[T]here is no point in history, whatever the cumulations of wisdom and power, in which the finiteness of man is overcome so that he could complete his own life, or in which history as such does not retain the ambiguity of being rooted in nature-necessity on the one hand while pointing towards transcendent, ‘eternal’ and trans-historical ends on the other hand” (2:4). But the difficulty, it seems to me, is that Niebuhr never succeeds in integrating these two strands of thought, except by a “dialectical conception of time and eternity” in which the second, ultimately, gives way to the first. Within the quantitative bounds of the monism underlying his thought, he may well stress the qualitative difference as much as it can be stressed—within those bounds, or, at times, perhaps, by “paradoxically” breaking out of them. But he never succeeds in really formulating the infinite qualitative difference in its own terms. Otherwise put, Niebuhr’s eschatology is, after all, teleology—even if a “trans-historical” teleology; fulfillment, on his view, is, after all, a matter of subjective, rather than objective, realization—even if in an eternity which “stands at the end of time.” Thus, ultimately, it is the office of “the power of God” “to overcome [*sic*] the ambiguity of man’s finiteness and freedom” (2:297). “Overcome” here means, I fear, not the *objective* completion of our subjective incompleteness, but, somehow (never clearly explained!), the transformation of our subjective incompleteness into a *subjective* completeness, the domestication of our *vita aliena* in and through God’s love for us into a *vita domestica* of our own. Still otherwise put, Niebuhr makes essentially the same assumption that Hartshorne accuses Dewey of making—namely, that “all ideals can be reduced

to . . . potential human achievements" (*Beyond Humanism*: 47). Thus Niebuhr can say that a "fuller disclosure" is necessary because "the potential meaningfulness of history is recognized as fragmentary and corrupted. It must be completed and clarified" (*NDM* 2:5). But a more than "fragmentary" meaningfulness of history is not a "potentiality" of history itself, but solely of God as the ultimate end of history, in the sense, not of "an end of duration," but of "an end of ultimate significance." No doubt, the one point where Niebuhr is led well beyond such a position is in his stress on the divine *judgment*, which implies, as he says, that "the eternal and divine is not regarded as the extension and fulfillment of the highest human possibilities," since "God's word is spoken *against* both his favoured nation and against all nations" (2:25). But, again, isn't the very notion of "impossible possibility" indicative of the problem?

3. Although Niebuhr wishes to speak of "an eternity involved in, and yet transcending, the temporal" (2:290), he also speaks again and again of "a suprahistorical eternity" that is "implied in history" because "the capacity by which man transcends temporal sequence, while yet being involved in it, implies a capacity of transcendence which is not limited by the sequence" (2:10). Evidently, "not being limited by the temporal" is not the same thing as "not being involved in the temporal." But it is far from clear that Niebuhr ever satisfactorily clarifies the difference. Indeed, he tends to contrast "the 'partial simultaneity' of man" with the "divine 'total simultaneity'" in a way that is indistinguishable from classical Christian theism (cf., e.g., 9 with 299). There is no aversion to the systematic ambiguity of such words as "partial" and "total," depending on whether they're referred to concretes or abstracts, and hence no clarification of how or why eternity is not limited by time even while being involved in time—except, perhaps, insofar as "being involved in" is taken to be satisfied by eternity's being merely externally related to time, even though time is internally related to eternity.

4. Another problem with Niebuhr—perhaps also connected with his monistic tendencies—is his tendency to say such things as that "the only principle for the comprehension of the whole (the whole which includes both

himself and his world) is therefore inevitably beyond his comprehension” (1:125). Or, again, that “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.). Here, in both statements, the impression is given that there is, in principle, even though not in fact, a continuity between the elements distinguished, whereas the truth, one may argue, is that, although they are indeed connected (namely, *inter-connected*), they are not continuous.