

In rereading H. Richard Niebuhr's "Life Is Worth Living," I have been struck more forcibly than before by several of the basic presuppositions of his argument.

He presupposes, for one thing, that "the most profound questions of life," which are usually uttered in the time of youth when beginnings—actually, as he himself goes on to make clear, *new* beginnings—must be made, have to do respectively with "knowledge," "conduct," and "belief." True, he doesn't say, or clearly imply, that questions having to do with these three realms are the *only* questions properly characterized as the deepest questions of life. But the fact that he doesn't so much as mention or allude to any others strongly suggests that they must be the foremost, if not the only, such vital questions. (Incidentally, it seems clear from what Niebuhr says about them that the questions to which he refers could be properly classified as "limiting questions," even though he himself does not so classify them. Just as assertions of what is the case independently of our thoughts and beliefs presuppose an affirmative answer to the limiting question of whether anything whatever is thus the case, so assertions of what is right necessarily beg the limiting question of whether anything at all is right, and assertions of what makes life worth living necessarily presuppose an affirmative answer to the limiting question of whether there is anything at all that really makes life worthwhile.)

Another presupposition, which I have also noted, from time to time, in Niebuhr's other writings, is that reason and faith are not alternative, but rather complementary—that in the third realm of belief, just as in the first and second realms of knowledge and conduct, the movement is never from faith to reason, but always from faith to faith, i.e., from a relatively <sup>less</sup> uncritical faith to a relatively <sup>more</sup> critical one. Thus what Niebuhr says about faith and reason in the realm of knowledge also holds good, *mutatis mutandis*, in the other two realms as well—namely, "No reason can take the place of this faith, but the faith can be made rational. To give up the faith itself is to give up life" (4).

Also striking to me is Niebuhr's evident presupposition that all answers to the questions that affirmative answers to the most profound questions of life alone make it possible for us to ask and answer are very much open to question and both need and deserve to be questioned in a deliberate, methodical, and reasoned way. Just as all our efforts to state what is real or true are fallible, and our minds, operating on the basis of "the faith in reality," must continually subject them to criticism, making distinctions between illusion and reality, lie and truth, so "the faith in the right," if mature, can assert, "There is a right, though all my standards are but poor and imperfect and unrighteous approximations of its content" (4); and "the faith in meaning" must go on "from the childlike faith which has been attacked [*sc.* by experience of life itself] to a critical yet firmer faith which knows that all the objects of devotion—home, country, and great causes—are insufficient of and in themselves" (4).

Niebuhr also evidently presupposes, very much as I do, that the only finally reasonable faith in the meaning of life locates the source of meaning, or the object of devotion, beyond all the usual such sources or objects—in what?—in "the very nature of things, . . . the source and end of the whole cosmic process," in which alone "there is the validation of life's enterprise" (4). Niebuhr thus presupposes that the purely formal meaning of "god" is "that reality for the sake of which I live and die," or "the cause and the reality for the sake of which this whole vast drama of cosmic evolution, of atomic and sub-atomic movement, of life's struggle and humanity's long travail, has gone on and now goes on" (5). By the same token, he evidently presupposes that the purely formal meaning of "God" in the distinctive sense given it by "the faith of Judaism, Christianity, and Mohammedanism," is "the final and infinite Being, . . . the 'I am that I am,' . . . the creative and destructive power, whence all things come and to which they all must return"; "th[e] last reality, which alone is eternal, on which all other beings depend"; "the inclusive and infinite source of being [*sic*] and value"; "the eternal power which moves through life and death, creation and destruction, to the redemption of all things, to an eternal peace and joy, in which all things participate" (5).

Finally, I note Niebuhr's presuppositions in the matters of theology and christology respectively.

Consistently with his statements cited above expressing the purely formal meaning of the radically monotheistic use of "God," he says that "there is nothing in all the world which is not rooted and grounded in the will, the desire, the love of its author and upholder" (5). If this statement recalls the many others in Niebuhr's writings that might be taken to affirm a kind of divine, or radically monotheistic, determinism, it can nonetheless be interpreted in a neoclassical, rather than in a classical, sense. The indeterminism that a neoclassical view regards as metaphysically indispensable in no way implies that there are uncaused things, or, if you will, that there are things that are *not* rooted and grounded in God's will, etc. It implies only that everything is also *self-caused*, even though there is nothing that is not also caused by others and created by God, in the only sense in which any other, including God can cause or create any other thing. Moreover, to say that there is nothing in all the world that is not rooted and grounded in the will of God in no way implies that world as such—as the *de facto* totality of things other than God—is rooted and grounded in God's will, desire, or love, unless by this be meant simply that strictly ultimate and therefore eternal aspect of God's will, desire, or love that is identical with God's very essence as God and hence is the least common denominator of all of God's particular volitions, desires, or acts of love. That there is *some* world can be rooted and grounded in God's will, etc. only in *this* sense of the words, even while the fact that there is this, that, or the other *particular* world is entirely rooted and grounded in God's particular volitions, desires, or acts of love. My point, of course, is not that Niebuhr himself was in any way in command of such neoclassical distinctions; the evidence clearly suggests that he definitely was not. But there is no reason, so far as I can see, why one cannot take his essential position in a neoclassical, rather than in some classical, sense; and, as Donald Fadner shows, there may very well be the best of reasons in other things that Niebuhr says or implies for so taking it.

As for christology, it is reassuring to see that the little Niebuhr has to say on the matter in this essay is quite different from what he says elsewhere,

in that it in no way presupposes the kind of unrevised revisionary christology that he otherwise sets forth. All that he says here is that, in Jesus Christ, "th[e] last reality, which alone is eternal, on which all other beings depend, is realized to be not only powerful, not only the cause which must be accepted if anything is to be worthwhile, but also as all-loving and redeeming" (5). In other words, through Jesus, "the creative and destructive power, whence all things come and to which they all must return," is decisively re-presented as the love that "moves through life and death, creation and destruction, to the redemption of all things, to an eternal peace and joy, in which all things participate."

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