

H. Richard Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* (Notes from reading, October 1995)

HRN's analysis of faith, or of the "forms of human faith," and thus of the "conflict of faiths," is his functional equivalent of the existentialist analysis that Bultmann developed on the basis of his appropriation of Heidegger. As such, it is an effort to create a formal terminology/conceptuality in which the issues between any one faith, or form of human faith, and any other can be understandably and fairly formulated (cf. 32).

In many ways, HRN's analysis shows the same concern as Bultmann's with the "personal" (or "existential"), as distinct from the "objective." In this respect, especially, HRN's analysis could be said to show signs of a distinctively Herrmannian influence in a way not unlike Bultmann's does.

merely "heuristic" (or "self-instructive") rather than "determinate," and that the second, determinate use is the use distinctive of radical monotheism, as distinct from both polytheism and henotheism, which, in different ways, have to do precisely with "the gods" in the determinate sense of these words. How this ambiguity of "God" arises is clarified when HRN goes on to develop the analogy between "faith and God" and "sense experience and physical reality." Just as "reason forms and interprets sense experience," so "reason permeates the activity of faith," in that "it organizes, compares, reflects, criticizes, and develops hypotheses in the midst of believing" (13). Thus, while faith itself and as such is one of "other nonrational activities of men," "reason is present in this faith. . . . faith reasons and faith doubts in its reasoning. It doubts some beliefs about God and about men and seeks surer beliefs" (15, 14). (This evidently parallels, if it does not converge with, my allowance that, although "to question whether the word 'God' as here analyzed refers to anything objectively real is not . . . a sensible inquiry," "[w]e may indeed inquire how the ground of our confidence is most appropriately understood or conceived and whether any among the historical religions is justified in claiming to be its decisive representation or revelation" [RG: 39].) The difficulty with HRN's analysis, however, is that he moves back and forth between heuristic and determinate uses of "God," and of "faith in God," without indicating that he is doing so by making the necessary distinctions between them. Thus, while what he says on p. 12 can only be understood as using "God" heuristically, what he says about theology in the last paragraph of the section (pp. 15 f.) almost certainly requires "God," and "faith in God," to be understood in the determinate senses distinctive of radical monotheism. And yet he gives no indication whatever that he intends the word in more than a single sense.

14 f.—What HRN says here about "the dual task of theology" evidently parallels what I say about theology as both critical interpretation (and thus historical theology), on the one hand, and as critical validation (and thus systematic as well as practical theology), on the other. What could "disciplined development of the reasoning that permeates faith" be, if not precisely critical interpretation of witness as the primary expression of faith, or as the expression of faith on the primary level of living understandingly, and hence reasoningly? And what is the "critique of faith," or "the criticism

12—Clearly, HRN, in his way, makes the same point that Bultmann makes in his, or that I make in mine (as, e.g., in my criticism of Marxsen's tendency to back into subjectivism). Significantly, HRN is less interested in simply opposing theology to "metaphysics and ontology" (a la Barth) than in clearly distinguishing them. The reason for distinguishing them is that theology "has been unable to abstract discourse about the objective reality, God, from discourse about the subjective activity of faith." In my terms, theology, like the faith of which it is the critical interpretation and validation, concerns itself with its object, God, concretely, in its meaning for us (hence its concern also with faith as authentic apprehension of this object), rather than simply abstractly, in its structure in itself.—Unfortunately, what HRN says in n. 2 indicates that he quite misses the other important distinction between "metaphysics and ontology," on the one hand, and "philosophical theology," on the other. There is as much reason to speak of "philosophical theology" as of a "theology of faith or of revelation" as something distinct from "metaphysics and ontology." Indeed, philosophical theology is, in its way, also a theology of faith or of revelation," namely, of *original* faith or revelation.

12 ff.—What HRN says here about "*theos*," namely that "[i]t is the name for that objective being, that other-than-the-self, which men have before them as they believe rather than as they see, hear, feel, or even as they reason," indicates that he recognizes a use for "God," even as for "faith in God," other than the use distinctive of radical monotheism, as one form of human faith distinct from and opposed to the two other forms. (Indeed, what he says evidently parallels, or even converges with, my statement that "the primary use or function of 'God' is to refer to the objective ground in reality itself of our ineradicable confidence in the final worth of our existence," or that "'God' is the very meaning of 'reality' when this word is defined in terms of our basic confidence in the significance of life and the kind of questions and answers [that] such confidence makes possible" [RG: 37, 39].) This is confirmed, then, in the next sentence when HRN says, "this objective reality—God or the gods—is acknowledged or known in faith." In other words, the "God" who is acknowledged or known in faith can be conceived or understood as either "God" (in the sense of radical monotheism) or "the gods" (in the sense of polytheism and henotheism respectively). This can only mean that the first use of "God" is different from the second in being

of faith, not as a subjective attitude or activity only but in relation to its objects," if not precisely critical validation of the claims to validity that the witness of faith makes or implies?—In point of fact, the disciplined development of the reasoning that permeates faith, if hardly also the critique of faith, could be a matter of Christian *teaching*, as distinct from Christian *theology*. Another defect of HRN's analysis is that he says nothing to clarify this important distinction.

15—HRN's statement here evidently reflects a view parallel to that represented by those who have variously distinguished "language games/forms of life," "languages, standpoints, and attitudes," or "guiding interests of knowledge." I.e., different "methods," or "methodologies" (*sic!*), are "developed by rational inquiries directed toward [different] objects and existing in connection with [different] nonrational activities of men." Of course, to exist in connection with is a rather less precise relation than to be guided by; and whether any human activities can be properly said to be simply "nonrational," as distinct from "prerational," or, better, "precritical," is a serious question.

15—Here is only one of many passages where HRN's insistence that "theology . . . must always participate in the activity of faith" is insufficiently nuanced to be acceptable. For all he says to the contrary, the faith in which theology, or the theologian, has to participate is the particular faith, or form of faith, of whose reasoning theology is said to be at once the disciplined development and the critique. But his own analogy of the literary critic, according to which the critic must live, not in the same vision as the poet's, but only "in the same world of values in which the poet lives," suggests that there is and must be a difference between the faith *in* which theology must participate and the (particular) faith *on* which theology is the critical reflection, or of which it is the disciplined development and critique. In my terms, the faith in which the theologian must participate is the "basic faith" in the meaning of life presupposed by the question of religion, and thus by every particular faith, or form of faith, while the faith on which theology is the critical reflection is the faith expressed by this particular religion or that, as well as by all of the other forms of praxis and culture explicitly mediated by this or that particular religion. Cf. HRN's own use of the phrases, "all

accepted faiths in life's meaning" (18) and "specific loyalties and systems of valuation" (23) with his reference to "the apparently universal human necessity of faith and of the inescapability of its gods, not as supernatural beings but as value-centers and objects of devotion" (23). The faith that is universally necessary is evidently distinct from all particular faiths, or forms of faith, in life's meaning and all specific loyalties and systems of valuation. Not surprisingly, then, HRN can speak of "the forms of human faith" as themselves "faiths," and also speak indifferently of his concern as an analysis of the conflict of faiths or as an inquiry into the forms of faith (11, 24).

16—If, in places such as this, HRN claims only that faith is "apparently" universal or necessary (cf. 23), in others, he asserts much more unqualifiedly that to be human is to live by faith (e.g., 22, 24 f., 28, 38, 117, 118).

25—HRN's distinction here between a person's "existence" and her or his "significance" indicates that he is not totally unaware of the relative complexity of faith as trust, as compared with the relative simplicity of faith as loyalty. The object of faith in the sense of "trust" is not only, or, perhaps, even primarily, a "center [or source] of value [=significance]," but is also, and, perhaps, first of all, a source of being [=existence]. There are clear indications that HRN hasn't thought all of this through—perhaps because he works too simplistically in terms of theory of value. Granted that we value most what values us, or gives us value, the necessary presupposition of being given any value at all is first being given being together with others in an ordered world. Consequently, we value not only what values us, but also what makes it possible for us to be valued. In short, the God in whom we trust is Creator (and Emancipator) as well as Consummator (and Redeemer). HRN himself makes just this distinction, or one closely related to it, when he distinguishes between "the principle of being" = "the Creator" and "the principle of value" = "the God of grace" (32; cf. 48, where he speaks of "the One who is their creator and savior"). Cf. 32, where HRN distinguishes between being "existent" and being "worthy of existence and worthy in existence."

27—HRN's use of the phrase, "one among many" here calls to mind Whitehead's use of the same phrase, or, more accurately, the similar phrase, "one among the many." Considering that HRN also speaks of "One beyond

all the many," or, even more tellingly, "the One beyond the many, in whom the [*sic*] many are one" (24, 16), one may feel confident that he, in his way, shared Whitehead's recognition that "there are two sense of the one—namely, the sense of the one which is all, and the sense of the one among the many."

33—*N.B.*: To be a "faithful self" is to be "concerned about value." Elsewhere, to be a "man of faith" is said to be a "promise-making, promise-keeping, promise-breaking being" (41), and to be "a faith-ful being" is said "to be trusted or distrusted as truthful or untruthful toward other selves" (46).

33—Although HRN is quite clear *that* "the realm of being" is the "cause" of "the principle of being," he nowhere clarifies *how* this can be the case. How can the realm be "*its* cause," i.e., the principle of being's cause?

This question becomes the more troubling when HRN subsequently speaks of "the cause," and thus the "faith loyalty" that are characteristic of radical monotheism as simply "the realm of being," and thus loyalty to this realm (37, 38, 40, 41, 42). Indeed, he more and more comes to speak of faith as "confidence in the One" and as "loyalty [not to the One, but only] to the universe of being" (41; cf. 40). Significantly, he says that "[t]he counterpart . . . of universal faith assurance" is "universal loyalty," not "universal *faith* loyalty." And on p. 35, he says that "for faith the kingdom of God is both the rule that is trusted and the realm to which loyalty is given," the second being identified with "the universe of being." That the many participate in the One and derive their being as well as their value or worth therefrom is clear enough. Less clear is that, or, at any rate, how, the One participates in the many and derives its being as well as its value or worth—its *de facto* actuality, although not its existence as such—from them.

40 ff.—There is clearly an ambiguity in HRN's concept of "incarnation," which he defines as "the concrete expression in a total human life of radical trust in the One and universal loyalty to the realm of being." If this were taken to mean simply the existential actualization of the possibility of faith in a single human life (which, of course, is just how he takes it in talking about Jesus Christ!), Israel could hardly be said to incarnate radical faith. The only reason this can be said is that, in the case of Israel, unlike that of Greece,

monotheism does not remain merely an idea or an ideal, at most "a movement of thought," and thus a part of the history of thought, but is "an element in total personal and communal life," finding expression in and through all "domains" of our cultural activities, such as "the religious, the political, the scientific, the economic, and the aesthetic" (39). This, however, is entirely different from the sense in which HRN claims that radical faith became incarnate in Jesus Christ, since although "[f]aith as confidence in the One and as loyalty to the universe of being was ingredient in every action and relation" in Israel, it was nonetheless encountered "very often" only "in its negative forms of distrust and disloyalty," which are the very things that "seem" to be absent in the case of Jesus (42).—The truth in what HRN says is completely accounted for by saying simply that the possibility for understanding human existence represented by the Hebrew prophets and the life and institutions of Israel so far as explicitly mediated thereby is the same possibility even more "radically" represented by the words and deeds of Jesus as well as by the witness of the earliest church. But HRN is seriously misled and misleading when he asserts that it is by contemplating "the faith of their Lord" that Christians apply to him the term "son of God." Indeed, by his own account, what makes an event or events "revelation" is that in it or in them "radical faith was elicited." Thus "the Christ event" is revelation "insofar as [it] elicits radical faith," and thus is seen as "demonstration of Being's loyalty to all beings and as call to decisive choice of God's universal cause" (42, 44; cf. 47, where "revelation" is said to be "an event which elicits the confidence of selves in their ultimate environment and calls upon them as free selves to decide for the universal cause").

110—HRN's use of "religion" here is interesting. Wouldn't he have better said that "every theory of value, so far as it is relational, presupposes faith in some center of value"? Cf. his somewhat similar use of "religion" on 118.—The different use on p. 48, as well as throughout the discussion on pp. 11-89, is surely to be preferred.—Similarly, HRN would have better concluded his essay by speaking of "the faith foundations of these relativisms," or of "the faiths that provide the foundations of these relativisms" (113).

114-126—It is interesting that in this essay faith is, for all practical purposes, identified simply with "trust," or "reliance," or "confidence" (cf. esp. 123:

"our faith, our reliance for meaning and worth"; and 125: "faith [or the gift of faith] . . . is the reliance of a person on a person"); and nothing is said about faith as also "loyalty" (although Jesus Christ is described at one point as "the most loyal man" [124]). Likewise interesting is that being "a cause," "[an] object of devotion," "[a] center of worth," or "something on which we rely for our meaning" are all simply different ways of talking about the same thing, in contrast with the first part of the book in which being "a center of value" is one thing, being "a cause," something else, corresponding to the fact that "faith assurance," or "faith reliance," is systematically distinguished from "faith loyalty" (118, 33 ff.; cf., however, 22).

141—HRN's challenge here that, in ~~the~~ all the spheres of "our various communities and callings," we must become "something more than we have been, not scientists only, nor logicians only, nor theologians only, but philosophers, lovers, and seekers of that inclusive wisdom which is an affair of whole selves in a whole world"—is striking on several counts, not least because of the understanding it implies of theology in relation to philosophy. By sharp contrast with the "Yale theology" that came to prominence after his time, he, in his own way, makes the same point Bultmann makes over against Barth about the unavoidability of the question of ontology, and thus of the theologian's need to collaborate with philosophy if not, in fact, to become a philosopher in her or his own right. Just as the theologian needs to become a philosopher in order <sup>to</sup> speak appropriately about the reality with which faith has to do, so she or he also needs to become a philosopher in order to define theology's proper place—in both its differences and its relations—among our various communities and callings. In this sense, we are all challenged, simply as human beings, to become philosophers, in the classical sense of loving and seeking "that inclusive wisdom [that] is an affair of whole selves in a whole world."