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Niebuhr's Doctrine of Revelation in Contemporary Theology

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Richard Coleman, in his fascinating and helpful book *Issues of Theological Warfare: Evangelicals and Liberals*, undertakes to explain the theological position of each protagonist to the other. The difficulty is obvious and did not go unnoticed by reviewers. It is the pride of Evangelical theologians that one can fairly represent the thought of their movement in systematic fashion. But does the bewildering maelstrom of Liberal Protestant thought lend itself to such pat schematization? Probably not, yet why is Coleman's thumbnail system of Liberal theology so helpful? We suggest that there are wide areas of agreement, or trends, which from time to time enable us to characterize Liberal theology as a whole. Or to be more modest,

there are at least broad types of Liberal theologies; or even more modestly still, there are certain spectra in which the thought of a given Liberal theologian can be placed. The utility of such 'placing' may be that it becomes apparent where a thinker might have taken his theology, or where he should have taken it in order to be consistent. We will ask such questions with regard to H. Richard Niebuhr, narrowing our focus to Niebuhr's doctrine of revelation. When we compare his theories with those of conceptually kindred theologians who differ on this or that point, we have the opportunity, as it were, to test Niebuhr's thought with reference to a theological 'control group'. But on to the discussion itself.

As is well known, Niebuhr's acquaintance with the thought of Ernst Troeltsch made him attentive to the problem of historical relativism. How can the observer standing in the midst of the shifting sands of history claim any absolute or normative reference point? Here appears our first question:

According to Niebuhr, can revelation really tell us about reality?

Niebuhr admits the gravity of the problem as well as the high stakes he is gambling: 'We are aware . . . that all our philosophical ideas, religious dogmas and moral imperatives are historically conditioned and this awareness tempts us to a new agnosticism.'¹ This is a problem dealt with engagingly in Peter Berger's *A Rumour of Angels*. Berger suggests that all 'signals of transcendence' in ordinary life be used to base a new theological reconstruction. Niebuhr dissents from this kind of solution. Such a course of action would be illusory since it could never start at ground zero as it pretends to do. Berger cannot help but use his traditionally-communally received religious notions to interpret such apparently neutral 'signals'. As Kaufman would say, Berger only has an idea of 'transcendence' at all because he has received the concept from his religious tradition. Niebuhr proposes something different from an attempted escape from conditionedness:

It is not apparent that one who knows that his concepts are not universal must also doubt that they are concepts of the universal, or that one who understands how all his experience is historically mediated must believe that nothing is mediated through history.²

Thus it seems that for Niebuhr, revelation, though historically mediated, can indeed tell us about reality. It may 'see in a glass darkly', but see it does. Here Niebuhr is very close to Tillich with his concept of religious symbols. Symbols, the media of revelation, participate in the Ultimate (or Holy) to which they point, yet without being identical to or exhausting that reality. Or in Francis Schaeffer's terms, they give us 'true truth' without being 'exhaustive truth'.

But this does not give us the whole picture in Niebuhr. There are other statements in his writings, particularly in the key text *The Meaning of Revelation*, which sound much more consonant with an entirely different theological perspective. Niebuhr wants above all things to be fair. But one may wonder if he doesn't sometimes bend so far over backwards as to fall. He begins by pointing out that Christian assertions about reality are not exhaustive, even though sufficiently true. He seems to go on to suggest that all assertions, no matter how contradictory, at least might be equally valid. For instance,

The events of history to which Christian revela-

¹ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1974), p. ix.

² *Ibid.*, p. 13.

tion refers may be regarded from the scientific, objective, non-committed point of view . . . when this is done it is apparent that the scientist has as little need for the hypothesis of divine action as Laplace had in his astronomy.³

Moreover it seems evident that the terms the external historian employs are not more truly descriptive of the things-in-themselves than those the [believer] uses and that the former's understanding of what really happened is not more accurate than the latter's.⁴

The difference is one of perspective. It all depends on the 'imaginative' *gestalt* one uses to order the otherwise random data of experience. And Niebuhr makes it clear that no finite knower can know the 'ultimate nature of the event'.⁵ Here he is close to Bultmann:

. . . objectivity of historical knowledge is not attainable in the sense of absolute ultimate knowledge, nor in the sense that the phenomena could be known in their very 'being in themselves' which the historian could perceive in pure receptivity. This 'being in itself' is an illusion of an objectivizing type of thinking. . . .⁶

What we are suggesting is that certain statements of Niebuhr tend to undermine his denial of agnostic relativism. In his scepticism about knowing the 'ultimate nature of the event', Niebuhr almost approaches Paul Van Buren, a radical theologian on the fringe of the 'Death of God' movement. Van Buren speaks of the 'dissolution of the Absolute'. He adopts a radical 'pluralism' which denies that things are ultimately to be characterized in any one fashion. All Christians know is that the story of Jesus has inexplicably grasped them with its contagion of freedom. He writes:

'Meaning' is not some . . . shadowy element which lies 'in' history. 'Meaning' . . . refers to the attitude of the viewer. . . . It points to *the way in which he sees* history, to the discernment and commitment arising out of his study of one piece of history which influences the way in which he looks at the rest of history and also his own life. Logically, to find 'meaning in history' is to have a 'blik'. . . .⁷

Before such questions as whether there is some absolute being, even 'Being itself', . . . [the

³ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

⁶ Rudolf Bultmann, *History and Eschatology, The Presence of Eternity* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1962), p. 121.

⁷ Paul Van Buren, *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1966), pp. 112-113.

Christian] will be wise to remain silent. . . . What he has to tell is the story of Jesus and the strange story of how his freedom became contagious on Easter.⁸

Van Buren has been quoted at some length so that the reader may feel the impact of the similarity between Niebuhr's statements (and the outlook implied in them) and the essentially *agnostic* and *relativistic* viewpoint of Van Buren, and all this despite Niebuhr's disavowal of 'a new agnosticism'. It seems that Niebuhr, to be consistent, should have, with Tillich, maintained an anchoring (though not exhaustive) truth-claim in Reality, or with Van Buren, he should have gone the whole way to pluralistic, agnostic relativism. We could be charitable and speak of a 'tension' in Niebuhr's thought, but why equivocate? This seems like a confusing contradiction.

Moving now to a second important facet of Niebuhr's doctrine of revelation, we must ask about the status of the 'Thou' encountered in revelation. Niebuhr plainly rejects the old notion of 'propositional revelation' for 'personal revelation, or encounter'. (It is this preference, among other things, which has led commentators to place Niebuhr in the 'Neo-orthodox' camp of theologians. It will become apparent that we question this piece of theological taxonomy.) Yet as James W. Fowler inadvertently demonstrates, the 'personality' of God is one of the most elusive and ambiguous elements of Niebuhr's system (if it can be called a system). In his study of Niebuhr's thought, we are told how Niebuhr came increasingly to personalize his originally rather abstract concept of God, yet we are left with equivocal expressions like this: '... we recognize that the Creator has something like personality.'⁹ The difficulty seems to be that Niebuhr defines God as the (abstract) 'principle of being itself',¹⁰ yet he adds 'The ultimate principle is not logical, not mechanical . . . it is personal.'¹¹ Are not these two statements rather difficult to hold together? Niebuhr sets himself the same task as does John A. T. Robinson when the latter describes his 'conviction that reality at its deepest is to be interpreted not simply at the level of its impersonal, mathematical regularities but in categories like love and trust, freedom,

responsibility, and purpose'.¹² Accordingly, for Niebuhr one's act of faith (trust plus loyalty) in God so conceived is one's affirmative acceptance of his own absolute dependence on the One.

Thus far, Niebuhr's God-concept is remarkably similar to Tillich's. Both would fit into what Gordon Kaufman calls the 'teleological' model of transcendence, where God as Being is conceived as the unmoved mover. Though 'personality' language may be used of such a God, it is only in a severely qualified sense. That is, to use Tillich's own distinction, God is here understood as the superpersonal 'ground of all personality'. The 'personal' qualities which so concern Niebuhr (and Robinson) are rooted in the ultimate ontological reality, e.g., 'love' is grounded in the universal process of separation and return. One's faith-response to this absolute dependence on, or ontological participation in, Being is 'the courage to be'. Yet Tillich is forthright in his admission that such faith is in 'the God beyond the God of theism', i.e., beyond (the image of) the personal God.

Yet Niebuhr wants to take the personality of God farther. He characterizes God as the structure of causation and purposiveness. Intentionality is present in the historical context as a whole. With this development Niebuhr moves into Kaufman's second model of transcendence, the 'interpersonal' model. Here personalistic language, according to Kaufman, is more directly appropriate since in a real sense we are talking about a 'living' God who 'acts' and who reveals himself in a succession of revelatory events (though not discontinuous, miraculously caused events). This factor of intentionality will make the difference. Or does it?

Niebuhr, it seems to us, runs into an enormously significant problem here. God's intentional will actually seems to make no difference. It 'dies the death of a thousand qualifications' since it is *essentially* unverifiable.

Love to God is conviction that there is a faithfulness at the heart of things: unity, reason, form and meaning in the plurality of being. It is the accompanying will to maintain or assert that unity, form and reason despite all appearances.¹³

What kind of 'unity, reason, form and meaning' are compatible with any apparent state of affairs, no matter how chaotic? If language means anything, such words are surely meant to make a claim about the discernable state of reality. Yet Niebuhr

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

⁹ H. Richard Niebuhr, quoted in James W. Fowler, *To See the Kingdom, the Theological Vision of H. Richard Niebuhr* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1974), p. 182.

¹⁰ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1970), p. 32.

¹¹ H. Richard Niebuhr, quoted in *To See the Kingdom, the Theological Vision of H. Richard Niebuhr* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1974), p. 194.

¹² John A. T. Robinson, *Exploration into God* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1967), p. 29.

¹³ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1978), p. 37.

says they have really nothing to do with discernable reality. To put the dilemma in slightly different terms, let us consider another of Niebuhr's statements: 'This same structure in things . . . "means intensely and means good"—not the good which we desire, but the good which we would desire if we were good and really wise.'¹⁴ In other words, we can be confident that God's providential direction of things will issue in what is good. Unfortunately, however, God's standards of 'good' seem to have very little to do with ours! So in the long run, we can be confident of nothing except that things will turn out as they turn out! Our standards of good give no indication of *how* things will turn out, though at the beginning of the quote they sounded like they could. Niebuhr's talk about 'unity, form, reason, meaning', or 'willing the good' is finally just bait on the theological hook! The all-important 'intentionality' recedes from the arena of meaningful discourse. Incidentally, these observations would tend to corroborate our observation. That is, Niebuhr implies that faith/revelation does not allow us definitely to characterize reality in any way. Rather it gives us only a subjective 'blik', in this case a positive disposition toward *whatever* happens rather than an assurance that something definite (definable) is happening, i.e. provident direction toward a meaningfully 'good' end. It only seems to give such assurance if one doesn't look too closely.

Niebuhr would have done well to stay (with Tillich) within Kaufman's first, 'teleological', model of transcendence. This model is quite adequate to Niebuhr's discussions in, e.g., *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* ('Radical Faith—Incarnate and Revealed in History') and *The Responsible Self* ('Responsibility in Absolute Dependence'), where he speaks of one's encounter

¹⁴ H. Richard Niebuhr, quoted in *To See the Kingdom, the Theological Vision of H. Richard Niebuhr*, p. 80.

with, or responsibility toward, the One in whom we participate and meet in all our finite relations. The idea seems to be that one's relation to Being may be characterized as 'personal' because life is not a spectator sport. Involvement in it is lived with the passion of subjectivity and requires an I-Thou, not I-it, relationship. Of course this might imply that the 'personal' applies, strictly speaking, more to the character of my relating than to that to which I relate.

Our comparisons of H. Richard Niebuhr with other contemporary theologians has attempted to clarify various threads of his thought by placing them in a larger context. In so doing, we have found reason to suggest that Niebuhr sometimes inadvertently tries to combine incompatible notions and sometimes tends toward positions much more radically liberal than one would at first think.

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