

## 2. Ultimate Trust and H. Richard Niebuhr's Faith in God

This chapter is a commentary on paragraphs from an essay that H. Richard Niebuhr first published in 1943 in *Motive* magazine with the title "The Nature and Existence of God." It was republished with the title "Faith in Gods and in God" as a supplementary essay in Niebuhr's book *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* (Harper and Row, Publishers: 1970).

Niebuhr introduces his approach to the topic of faith in God by distinguishing faith from intellectual belief and defining faith in general terms as personal trust or reliance on something. Here is part of the long paragraph that begins the first section entitled "What is Faith?"

. . . The belief that something exists is an experience of a wholly different order from the experience of reliance on it. The faith we speak of in Protestantism and of which, it seems to us . . . the Bible speaks, is not intellectual assent to the truth of certain propositions, but a personal, practical trusting in, reliance on, counting upon something. So we have faith in democracy not insofar as we believe that democracy exists, but insofar as we rely upon the democratic idea or spirit to maintain itself and to influence the lives of people continuously. We have faith in the people not insofar as we believe in the existence of such a reality as "the people" but insofar as we count upon the character of what we call the people to manifest itself steadfastly in the maintenance of certain values. Faith, in other words, always refers primarily to character and power rather than to existence. Existence is implied and necessarily implied; but there is no direct road from assent to the intellectual proposition that something exists to the act of confidence and reliance upon it. Faith is an active thing, a committing of self to something, an anticipation. It is directed toward something that is also active, that has power or is power. It is distinguished from belief both on its subjective side and with respect to that to which it refers. For belief as assent to the truth of propositions does not necessarily involve reliance in action on that which is believed, and it refers to propositions rather than, as faith does, to agencies and powers.

Niebuhr is thoroughly rejecting a style of Christian thinking that still persists in the twenty-first century. Fundamentalist theology is blatantly preoccupied with "correct" belief. Much liberal theology likewise fails to probe beyond a belief in liberal views to the quality of faith that Niebuhr is describing. So widespread is this misunderstanding that I prefer to use the word "trust" rather than "faith." Niebuhr goes on to describe what it means to trust in gods or in God. Here is the opening paragraph of the second section entitled "Who is God?"

We arrive then at the problem of deity by setting out from the universal human experience of faith, of reliance or trust in something. Luther expressed this idea long ago when he asked, "What does it mean to have a god, or what is God?" and answered his question by saying, "Trust and faith of the heart alone make both God and idol . . . For the two, faith and God, hold close together. Whatever then thy heart clings to . . . and relies upon, that is properly thy God."

Niebuhr then describes in detail the many gods or meaning-givers that we trust. Here are some of his illustrations on that topic:

. . . It is not a figure of speech but a truth that mothers make gods out of their sons and daughters, that the home is the god of all men to a certain extent, since they live for the sake of that home, labor for it and adore it in many an hour of private devotion. One of the most powerful gods of all times, of primitive as of civilized periods, is sex which is represented by many symbols, for the sake of which, and for the enjoyment of which men live. Beyond the

dark powers, the Chthonian deities of the physical life of man, there are our Olympian gods – our country, our ideologies, our democracies, civilizations, churches, our art which we practice for art’s sake, our truth which we pursue for truth’s sake, our moral values, our ideas and social forces which we personalize, adore, and on which we depend for deliverance from sheer nothingness and the utter inconsequence of existence.<sup>1</sup>

So let us each ask ourselves which of these many gods have been most prominent in our own personal devotion. And why does it matter that we have this rich polytheistic devotion? Niebuhr shows how all these meaning-givers are limited and how they conflict with one another and thus create in our inner life a longing for unity or integration.

. . . this constitutes the tragedy of our religious life – that none of these values or centers of value exist universally, or can be object of a universal faith. None of them can guarantee meaning to our life in the world save for a time. They are all finite in time and in space and make finite claims upon us. Hence we become aware of two characteristics of our faith and its gods: that we are divided within ourselves and socially by our religion, and that our gods are unable to save us from the ultimate frustration of meaningless existence. . . .

In this situation we dream of integration, of a great pantheon in which all the gods will be duly served, each in its proper sphere. So we speak sometimes of establishing a new synthesis of civilization, of the integration of personality, of the recognition of a great hierarchy of values. But the synthesis is never achieved, the integration never worked out. For each god in turn requires a certain absolute devotion and the denial of the claims of the other gods. So long as country seems an absolute source of value to us, so long devotion to one country will make us deny the claims of every other. So long as we pursue art for art’s sake, so long art will be the enemy of morality and of truth. The best we can achieve in this realm is a sort of compromise among many absolute claims. We remain beings, therefore, with many faiths held in succession. We practice a kind of successive polygamy, being married now to this and now to that object of devotion.

Each of us might list the conflicts that have most plagued us. Is it between work and family? Is it between our ideals and our passions? Also we might ask of ourselves what sort of integration we long for. Niebuhr goes on to describe an even deeper tragedy of this polytheistic religious devotion.

The tragedy of our religious life is not only that it divides us within ourselves and from each other. There is a greater tragedy – the twilight of the gods. None of these beings on which we rely to give content and meaning to our lives is able to supply continuous meaning and value. The causes for which we live all die. The great social movements pass and are supplanted by others. The ideals we fashion are revealed by time to be relative. The empires and cities to which we are devoted all decay. At the end nothing is left to defend us against the void of meaninglessness. We try to evade this knowledge, but it is ever in the background of our minds. The apocalyptic vision of the end of all things assails us, whether we see that end as the prophets of the pre-Christian era did or as the pessimists of our time do. We know that “on us and all our race the slow, sure doom falls pitiless and dark.” All our causes, all our ideas, all the beings on which we relied to save us from worthlessness are doomed to pass.

As long as we make passing things our final ground for our life’s worthwhileness, our worthwhileness is also passing. This point is made by Buddhism and other Asian religions as well as Christianity and Judaism. So how does Christian theology state the alternative? In the third section of this essay, entitled “God,” Niebuhr gives his answer.

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<sup>1</sup> Niebuhr used the now obsolete convention of employing “men” and “his” to mean both men and women. I have not attempted to upgrade his language, for I want the reader to understand that my commentary is based on his words, not on some paraphrase of them.

What is it that is responsible for this passing, that dooms our human faith to frustration? We may call it the nature of things, we may call it fate, we may call it reality. But by whatever name we call it, this law of things, this reality, this way things are, is something with which we all must reckon. We may not be able to give a name to it, calling it only the "void" out of which everything comes and to which everything returns, though that is also a name. But it is there – the last shadowy and vague reality, the secret of existence by virtue of which things come into being, are what they are, and pass away. Against it there is no defense. This reality, the nature of things, abides when all else passes. It is the source of all things and the end of all. It surrounds our life as the great abyss into which all things plunge and as the great source whence they all come. What it is we do not know save that it is and that it is the supreme reality with which we must reckon.

The very actuality that is responsible for the passing of all things is the one actuality that is not passing. The existence of this "Reality" is not in question. This is indeed the Supreme Reality with which we must reckon. But how can we trust it?

Now a strange thing has happened in our history and in our personal life: our faith has been attached to that great void, to that enemy of all our causes, to that opponent of all our gods. The strange thing has happened that we have been enabled to say of this reality, this last power in which we live and move and have our being, "Though it slay us yet will we trust it." We have been allowed to attach our confidence to it, and put our reliance in it which is the one reality beyond all the many, which is the last power, the infinite source of all particular beings as well as their end. And insofar as our faith, our reliance for meaning and worth, has been attached to this source and enemy of all our gods, we have been enabled to call this reality God.

This is not the Reality that most people call "God." This is not the Reality that most people trust. The faith that Niebuhr is pointing to is not what most people call "faith." "Faith" for Niebuhr is not belief in an idea. "God" for Niebuhr is not an idea that makes sense of things. God is that supreme reality of which no sense can be made. Niebuhr's God is beyond sense and no sense. As Niebuhr says later in the essay, this faith is "the end of the road of faith," for such faith is "unassailable." Niebuhr asks three questions: "What does it mean to attach faith to this power?" "How does such faith come about?" and "What are the consequences of such faith?" Here is part of his answer to the first question:

Another way of describing this faith is one which I have learned from Professor Whitehead's little book on religion. Religion he says, "is transition from God the void to God the enemy, and from God the enemy to God the companion." When we say that we conceive faith in the great void and the great enemy we mean that we have learned to count on it as friend. We have learned to rely on it as a cause to which we may devote our lives, as that which will make all our lives and the lives of all things valuable even though it bring them to death.

This shift from enemy to friend is not a shift in the nature of God but in the attitude of human beings. It is a shift in a person's relationship with God. Or we might also say that it is a realization of our true nature, for this faith, this trust is our true nature from which we have all fled. Strange as it may seem, trusting this Final Reality is our ultimate normality, not the aberration it may seem to someone who still views this God as enemy. "How does such faith come about?" is Niebuhr's second question. He points out that this ultimate faith may come into being in many ways as well as in the confrontation with the event of Jesus seen as the Christ, but certainly it has appeared in this concrete meeting. I will focus on our experience of that transformative happening in the next chapter. In this chapter I am focusing on the meaning of final faith or Ultimate Trust. Of special interest in that regard is what Niebuhr has to say in answer to his third question: What are the consequences of such faith? The concluding four paragraphs of this essay clarify what faith in God is actually like.

Third, the consequences of faith in the one, final, and only God are not automatic, for faith involves the whole person, and the gift of faith is not a possession which we can hold in our power. It is something that lives in man and by which man lives. It is not a possession which can be held fast in the form of a creed. It is a basis for all thinking, but though it may be expressed in the form of a thought, it is not itself a thought; it is the reliance of a person on a person. Beginning with that faith life is involved intellectually and morally in a continuous revolution.

If our faith were simply belief in a creed, it could be our possession. We could boast that we have believed it and, in that sense, have achieved it. But the faith Niebuhr is describing is not an achievement or a possession. We might say that this faith "is us" in our deepest being. This faith or Ultimate Trust enriches our thinking but it is not thinking itself. This faith or Ultimate Trust enriches our moral behavior but it is not specific moral behaviors. Niebuhr has more to say about both of these points.

This faith opens the way to knowledge. It removes the taboos which surround our intellectual life, making some subjects too holy to be inquired into and some too dangerous for us to venture into. Yet it grants reverence to the mind for which now no being is too low to be worthy of a loving curiosity. All knowledge becomes reverent and all being is open to inquiry. So long as we try to maintain faith in the gods, we fear to examine them too closely lest their relativity in goodness and in power become evident, as when Bible worshipers fear Biblical criticism, or democracy worshipers fear objective examination of democracy. But when man's faith is attached to the One, all relative beings may be received at his hands for nurture and for understanding. Understanding is not automatically given with faith; faith makes possible and demands the labor of the intellect that it may understand.

Niebuhr is describing a faith that is open to all scientific curiosity and exploration, open to all interior or contemplative inquiry, open to embrace or to doubt any and all philosophical, theological, or ideological views of the past, present, or future. Yet this faith is not anti-intellectual. It does not discourage the work of the intellect. Faith can be said to give us perspective on everything, yet to express our specific understanding of anything requires the labor of the intellect. Niebuhr takes a similar view toward morality.

The moral consequences of this faith is that it makes relative all those values which polytheism makes absolute, and so puts an end to the strife of the gods. But it does not relativize them as self-love does. A new sacredness attaches to the relative goods. Whatever is, is now known to be good, to have value, though its value be still hidden to us. The moral consequences of faith in God is the universal love of all being in him. It is not an automatic consequence. Faith is never so complete that it is not accompanied by self-defensiveness. But this is its requirement: that all beings, not only our friends but also our enemies, not only men but also animals and the inanimate, be met with reverence, for all are friends in the friendship of the one to whom we are reconciled in faith.

In this paragraph Niebuhr has outlined the basis for Christian ethics. Faith makes a difference in all that we do, but that difference must be worked out in moment-by-moment living in trust within each fresh situation of our lives. The gods we may have previously worshiped or may still be tempted to worship are all dead, and yet they are also alive as relative values to be held sacred in this master context of faith that makes all things sacred.

So faith in God involves us in a permanent revolution of the mind and of the heart, a continuous life which opens out infinitely into ever new possibilities. It does not, therefore, afford ground for boasting, but only for simple thankfulness. It is a gift of God.

Again and again, Niebuhr has referred to faith as a gift, not an accomplishment or a possession. Many Protestant thinkers who have understood faith as that one thing we must do

to be healed have been puzzled as to how faith could also be a gift as well as our primal action. Here is a way to contemplate that paradox: Our life is a gift, but we must do the living. In a similar way faith is a gift, but we must do the faithing. Our Ultimate Trust in Ultimate Reality is our Ultimate Normalcy but we must do the trusting. This doing is a paradoxical doing perhaps better described as being open to the life of trust. As we open to trusting God, the gift of trust flows into our lives. We do not have to manufacture it. We do not have to force it.

And we can never claim that we have achieved faith, for this Ultimate Trust is our true nature given to us with life itself. We cannot even claim to possess faith, for in each and every moment we must receive it and enact it in order to be it. And as Niebuhr and you and I all experience, our enactment of trust in God is never complete. We remain on a journey from unfaith to faith. In the closing pages of *The Responsible Self* Niebuhr comes up with another colorful way of expressing this profound humility we need to take toward our enactment of faith. He speaks of a "strange miracle" in which we are made suspicious that our suspicion of God is itself suspicious. In the next chapter we will explore further this strange miracle with the aid of Paul Tillich.