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Radical Monotheism and Western Culture by H. Richard Niebuhr

H. Richard Niebuhr, for many years Sterling Professor of Christian Ethics at Yale University Divinity School, was one of mid-century's most respected teachers and writers. This book presents in revised and expanded form the Montgomery Lectures on Contemporary Civilization which Dr. Niebuhr gave at the University of Nebraska in 1957. The six chapters were originally three lectures. To them are added four supplementary essays that expand and complement the ideas in the Lectures.

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Essay III - Faith in Gods and in God

There is nothing distinctive or peculiar about a Protestant's interest in the ultimate theological problem. We are concerned with the questions of God's nature and existence not as Protestants or Catholics, Christians or Jews, theologians or philosophers, laymen or clergy, but simply as human beings. Yet each of us raises these problems in a specific form, each asks his question in that special way which he has not only learned from his tradition, but which has been made necessary by his own personal wrestling with the question of life's meaning. Hence we often quarrel about the answers we get to our questions without realizing that they are answers to different questions. And sometimes we quarrel about our questions, maintaining that our way of asking is the only significant way; that our problem is the only meaningful one. So the philosopher of religion may begin with a certain definition of the term "God" and then ask, "Does a being having this nature exist?" This is a perfectly legitimate question. But it is wrong to think of it as the only proper way of raising the problem. Many different definitions of the nature of God may be framed, and hence many problems of existence may be raised; and the contention about the answers may simply be contention about the social meaning of a word, a matter on which we ought to be able to come to an agreement easily were it not for the emotional and sentimental attachment we have to certain words. The question about

God may be raised in a wholly different way, in the manner of the metaphysician who asks, "What is the ultimate nature of reality, or what is the first cause, what the final end, what the nature of the primal energy, what are the attributes of substance?" Here we have a different series of questions, and the relation of the answers given to them to the answers given to the question whether "God" exists is not immediately apparent. If the term "God" is used in this latter, metaphysical type of inquiry, it is not to be taken for granted that the word has the same reference, the same meaning, which it has in the former type.

It is important, first of all, to recognize that each of us raises the question about "God" in a specific way, that **it** is necessary for us to phrase our question as sharply as we can, to seek an answer to that particular question and to avoid the defensiveness which makes us regard our question, just because it is ours, as more important than anyone else's. We need also, of course, to avoid the feeling that our question is unimportant because others have other questions. As a Protestant theologian or as a man who seeks to understand what he believes with the aid of Protestant theology, I do not raise the question of God in the way the philosopher of religion or the metaphysician does; while I cannot maintain that my way of asking is superior to theirs, neither can I be easily convinced that my question is illegitimate, that it is not a true, human, and important question.

It appears that the different methods we employ in religious inquiry are not wholly unlike the different methods used in science. Though all scientists are interested in truth they do not raise the question about truth in the abstract, but ask specific questions, such as those which psychologists on the one hand, physicists on the other, natural scientists on the one hand, social scientists on the other, raise and attempt to answer. Each scientist, doubtless, tends to think that his question and mode of inquiry is the most important, yet he learns eventually to live in a certain democracy of science, wherein he maintains his right to seek truth in a specific way without requiring all others to abandon their specific inquiries and to join him in his search. In some such fashion I conceive Protestant theology at work. It is well aware of other inquirers in the same general field and it profits greatly by counsel and debate with them. Yet it seeks to remain true to its own particular problem and to its own method of inquiry.

How, then, does Protestantism raise the question of God and how does it seek and find its answers to its problems? How does the problem of God

present itself to us who work in this living tradition? It comes to us as an eminently practical problem, a problem of human existence and destiny, of the meaning of human life in general and of the life of self and its community in particular. It does not arise for us in the speculative form of such questions as "Does God exist?" or "What is the first cause, what the ultimate substance?" Our first question is "*How is faith in God possible?*" In other words, the problem of God arises for us in its subjective rather than objective, or, better, in personal rather than impersonal form. (That we are exposed to certain great dangers in consequence -- to solipsism, for instance -- is evident but every inquiry involves particular dangers and the possibility of particular errors.) This seems to be the way in which the great Protestant thinkers -- Luther, Calvin, Edwards, Schleiermacher, Kierkegaard -- and that philosopher who is most Protestant of all philosophers, Kant -- raised the question about God primarily. It is also the way in which Protestantism as a religious movement has approached the religious problem of the ordinary man. It has not sought to convince a speculative, detached mind of the existence of God, but has begun with actual moral and religious experience, with the practical reasoning of the existing person rather than with the speculative interests of a detached mind.

1. WHAT IS FAITH?

The point at which such Protestants begin their analysis of the problem of God is that of practical human faith in deity. Such faith may be described in various ways, but it is never correctly described when it is initially defined in terms of intellectual belief. 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 classic book of Christianity, 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.

Now it is evident, when we inquire into ourselves and into our common life, that without such active faith or such reliance and confidence on power we do not and cannot live. Not only the just but also the unjust, insofar as they live, live by faith. We live by knowledge also, it is true. but not by knowledge without faith. In order to know we must always rely on something we do not know; in order to walk by sight we need to rely on what we do not see. The most evident example of that truth is to be found in science, which conducts its massive campaign against obscurity and error on the basis of a great faith in the intelligibility of things; when it does not know and finds hindrances in the path of knowledge, it asserts with stubborn faith that knowledge nevertheless is possible, that there is pattern and intelligibility in the things which are not yet intelligible. Such faith is validated in practice, yet it evermore outruns practice. Our social life, also, proceeds from moment to moment on the ground of a confidence we have in each other which is distinct from our belief in each other's existence and distinct also from our knowledge of each other's character, though such belief and such knowledge do form the background and the foreground of our faith. How much we live by faith in this area becomes apparent to us when we are deceived or betrayed by those on whom we have relied. When treaties are broken, when bankers embezzle, when marriage partners become disloyal, when friends betray, then doubt of all things invades our minds and we understand how much we have lived by reliance on our fellow men. But we also discover that without some confidence which goes beyond our knowledge we cannot exist at all since we are social persons who cannot live in isolation, and that we are ignorant persons who must in all their living go far beyond their knowledge of each other if they would live at all.

When we inquire into this element of faith or confidence in our life as human beings we become aware of one aspect of it which may above all else be called religious, because it is related to our existence as worshiping beings, even as our faith in the intelligibility of nature is related to our existence as knowing beings and our confidence in each

other is related to our moral life. This is the faith that life is worth living, or better, the reliance on certain centers of value as able to bestow significance and worth on our existence. It is a curious and inescapable fact about our lives, of which I think we all become aware at some time or another, that we cannot live without a cause, without some object of devotion, some center of worth, something on which we rely for our meaning. In this sense all men have faith because they are men and cannot help themselves, just as they must and do have some knowledge of their world, though their knowledge be erroneous.

The universality of such religious faith is obscured for us. For one thing, we tend in highly institutionalized societies, such as our own, to confuse the reality of human processes with their institutional organization and expression. So we have a tendency to think of schools, laboratories, books, and teachers when we speak of education. Doubtless this institutional education is very important but we need again and again to be made aware of the fact that the actual process of conditioning human minds, of equipping them with the instruments of words and ideas, of giving them an orientation in the world, of transmitting a tradition and developing latent possibilities, goes far beyond the schools and can go on even without the aid of official education. The political process, also, whereby men are governed and govern each other, whereby power is balanced against power, goes on in our community even when the official agencies of politics, the institutionalized forms, are not present. It is so with religion and religious faith and worship. We tend to confuse these with the official organizations and habits, with observance of special rites, with the functioning of a special leadership, and with the expression of a specific faith. But religion is a much more various thing. And it is inescapable as institutions of religion are not. As the faith that life is worth living, as the reference of life to a source of meaning and value, as the practice of adoration and worship, it is common to all men. For no man lives without living for some purpose, for the glorification of some god, for the advancement of some cause. If we do not wish to call this faith religion, there is no need to contend about the word. Let us say then that our problem is the problem of faith rather than of religion.

Now to have faith and to have a god is one and the same thing, as it is one and the same thing to have knowledge and an object of knowledge. When we believe that life is worth living by the same act we refer to some being which makes our life worth living. We never merely believe that life is worth living, but always think of it as made worth living by something on which we rely. And this being, whatever it be, is properly

termed our god.

2. 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."

Now if this be true, that the word "god" means the object of human faith in life's worthwhileness, it is evident that men have many gods, that our natural religion is polytheistic. (It is also evident that there can be no such thing as an actual atheist though there may be many who profess atheism.) Whatever be our relation to the official monotheism of our religious institutions, the private faith by which we live is likely to be a multifarious thing with many objects of devotion and worship. The most common object of devotion on which we depend for our meaning and value is the self. We tend in human life to a kind of religious Narcissism whereby we make ourselves the most admired of all beings and seek to interpret the meaning of all experiences by reference to their meaning for the central self. The self becomes the center of value and at the same time the being which is to guarantee its own life against meaninglessness, worthlessness, and the threat of frustration.

But this self is never an adequate god for a self. We are forced to recognize that many things bring satisfaction into our lives from the outside, as it were, and we are so interdependent on all the beings about us that we inevitably admire, adore, and look to others as sources of value and meaning to ourselves. Hence we live not only for our own sakes but for the sake of other persons. 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 the social forces which we personalize, adore, and on which we depend for deliverance from sheer nothingness and the utter inconsequence of existence.

One does not need to draw too sharp a line between personal and institutional religion at this point, as though personal religion were by and large polytheistic while institutional religion is monotheistic. It would be difficult to make out a strong case for the actual monotheism of institutional faith. For instance, one of the beings on which institutionalized faith relies for deliverance from meaninglessness is religion itself.

We note that these centers of value, these objects of adoration, have many different forms of existence. Some are visible and tangible objects of whose reality our senses give us assurance. Some are essences, ideas, concepts, or images which are accessible only to abstract thought, but which exercise a certain compulsion over the mind. Some are movements known only by a kind of empathy or by an intuition that outruns sense; some have the peculiar and hard-to-define reality of selves or persons. But in some sense they all exist.

Yet this is true -- and this constitutes the tragedy of our religious life -- that none of these values or centers of value exists 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 as 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.

Sometimes we speak of our internal division as though it were caused by the incompleteness of reason's domination over the more primitive desires which are rooted in our physical constitution. But then we realize that we do not desire as primitives or as animals do, but with a passion that indicates how great an investment we have made in the objects of desire. We note also that the life of reason is not without its desire and devotion. We become aware of the truth that our internal divisions are due to a diversity of religious attachments. We look to the objects of the mind for meaning, but we cannot make our physical existence meaningful by our attention and devotion to truth. Our inner conflicts seem due to the fact that we have many sources of value, amid

that these cannot all be served. Our social conflicts also always have religious character. We cannot and do not fight our wars simply for the sake of maintaining our physical existence. We always appeal to values for the sake of which we live and without which we think that life would not be worth living. We battle for America amid England and Germany, which give worth to our lives, and not simply for ourselves. We fight for liberty or solidarity, for equality or for order, for fraternity in a large or in a narrow sense. But none of these gods is universal, and therefore devotion to one always implies exclusion of another. So the gods are divisive socially as well as within the person.

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.

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.

3. GOD

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, this 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.

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.

Let us raise three questions about this fact that faith has become attached to the void and to the enemy which surrounds our life. The first one is, What does it mean to attach faith to this power? The second, How does such faith come about? And the third, What are the consequences of such faith?

First, to have faith in this reality means that, having been driven away from our reliance on all the lesser causes, we have learned to conceive of amid to rely upon this last power, this nature of things, as itself the greatest of all causes, the undefeatable cause. We have learned to say, "For this cause was I born and therefore I came into the world that I might make glorious the name and exhibit the power of this last cause." And we have been enabled to say it with satisfaction, with love and

hope and confidence; for to have faith in something as able to give value to our lives is to love it. Without such love there is no faith. And to have faith is also to live in hope, in constant anticipation of new unfoldings of worth amid meaning.

To attach faith, hope, and love to this last being, this source of all things and this slayer of all, is to have confidence which is not subject to time, for this is the eternal reality, this is the last power. It is to have a love for that which is not exclusive but inclusive, since this reality, this great X, is the source of all things and the end of all. It is, therefore, to be put into the position of those who can love all things in him or in it, and who deny all things in it. "It is a consoling idea," wrote Kierkegaard, "that before God we are always in the wrong." All the relative judgments of worth are equalized in the presence of this One who loves all and hates all, but whose love like whose hatred is without emotion, without favoritism. To have hope of this One is to have hope that is eternal. This being cannot pass away. And to hope for the manifestations of his judgments and his love is to hope to eternity.

When we conceive faith in this one, our foundations have indeed been laid in despair, not in the grandiloquent despair of *A Free Man's Worship*, but in the sober despair which has faced the reality of the death of all things and the endlessness of the creative process.

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."¹ 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.

Second, how is such a faith possible? How does it happen that this void, this enemy, is recognized as friend, that faith attaches itself to the last power, to the great hidden mystery, and calls it God, that man can lose himself in adoration of this being, saying with the Psalmist, "Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee?" or with Job, "Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him"?

It has happened in our human history and it does happen in personal histories. Men may dispute endlessly about the worth of that happening,

though when they do they always do so on the basis of another faith than faith in this God. But there can be no doubt of the fact that it has happened and that it does happen.

How does it happen to the individual? It does not happen without the struggle of his reason. For by reason he discovers the inadequacy of all his gods and is driven to despair in life's meaning. It does not happen without experience, without time experience of frustration, of noting the death of all things, the experience of the internal division in which his various worship involves him, the experience of the great social catastrophes which show the weakness of the great causes and beings in which he trusted as saviors of life. It does not happen without the operation of something we must call spiritual, something which is like the intuition of the thinker, like the creative insight of the artist, like the flash of recognition of truth. All these elements are involved. Furthermore, this transfer of faith to the ultimate being does not take place without moral struggle, without recognition of the unworthiness both of our transgressions and our obediences to our moral laws.

But for most men another element is involved -- the concrete meeting with other men who have received this faith, and the concrete meeting with Jesus Christ. There may be other ways, but this is the usual way for us, that we confront in the event of Jesus Christ the presence of that last power which brings to apparent nothingness the life of the most loyal man. Here we confront the slayer, and here we become aware that this slayer is the life-giver. He does not put to shame those who trust in him. In the presence of Jesus Christ we most often conceive, or are given that faith. We may try to understand how we might have received the faith without Jesus Christ; but the fact remains that when this faith was given Jesus Christ was there.

So it is in history. This faith in the One has had its occasional manifestations elsewhere. But it has happened in history that it has been conceived and received where a people who regarded themselves as chosen suffered the most cruel fate, and where a Son of man who was obedient to death actually suffered death. Here the great reconciliation with the divine enemy has occurred. And since it has occurred, there is no way of getting rid of it. It is in our human history.

We do not say that this faith in the last power is something men ought to have. We say only this, that it is the end of the road of faith, that it is unassailable, and that when men receive it they receive a great gift. We

say that it is given, that it has been given, that it is being given, and that when it is received very profound consequences follow.

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.

This faith opens time 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.

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.

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 grounds for boasting but only for simple thankfulness. It is a gift of God.

