

Niebuhr expressly recognizes that (1) "there are structures on every level [sc. of reality, or of the world]"; and (2) scientists analyze such structures "empirically," even as philosophers analyze them (or the "superstructures" besides them) "metaphysically" (*Justice and Mercy*: 135 f.). Conspicuously missing from his discussion, however, is anything like the clear Heideggerian-Bultmannian recognition that, even at the level of history (of the self, the personal, freedom, and so on) there are also structures, which philosophers also have the task of analyzing—if neither exactly "empirically" nor exactly "metaphysically," then by way of "existentialist analysis."

Significantly, Niebuhr uses "structure" as a quasi-technical term distinct both from "mystery" (as, e.g., in the statements, "[T]he world by its wisdom knows all the structures of reality, but it cannot penetrate to the ultimate mystery" [135]; and "The world has all kinds of structures, relationships, coherences, sequences, and systems which can be analyzed by the intellect, but beyond which there is mystery" [128]) and "meaning" (as, e.g., in the statement, "the Christian faith is not just a reaction to mystery. For in the Christian faith, . . . it is presumed and affirmed that there is meaning in the mystery, and that the meaning is disclosed by a whole series of disclosures which culminated in Christ" [128], or when he speaks of "incandescent points in history, where the mystery is revealed as meaning, in modern parlance, existentially" [129]). To this not inconsiderable extent, then, Niebuhr's thought clearly converges with my own. To be human is not only to experience "the world of intelligibility" whose *structures* science and philosophy, in their different ways, properly subject to analysis, but also to have "a sense of mystery," whose *meaning* is disclosed or revealed in Christian faith as well as, presumably, other logically comparable forms of faith.

Elsewhere Niebuhr is quoted as saying that "the Christian faith, on the one hand asserts the mystery of the Divine, and on the other hand, gives it a specific meaning." Thus its "unique character" is "to have specific meaning given to mystery, rather than to have general principles of meaning, as there are in the great metaphysical systems" (7). Interestingly, metaphysics is here associated,

not with “structures,” but with “meaning,” albeit by means of the concept, “general *principles* of meaning,” which may not be all that different from “structures,” after all! In any case, here, too, Niebuhr speaks and seems to think in terms strikingly convergent with my own.

16 July 2003