

This is the last document
in the 6th section of
Installment 2 (ST: 4-12),
"The Foundation of Faith"

There was the original
and also this copy,
which I can only surmise
should have
remained with you.

A.

Is conformity to the facts of experience a criterion of heresy?

1. According to R. Niebuhr, the form of Christian pacifism that is really based on "the Renaissance faith in the goodness of man" is "not only heretical when judged by the standards of the total gospel. It is equally heretical when judged by the facts of human existence." In Niebuhr's judgment, "it is important to recognize this lack of conformity to the facts of experience as a criterion of heresy." "All forms of religious faith are principles of interpretation which we use to organize our experience. Some religions may be adequate principles of interpretation at certain levels of experience, but they break down at deeper levels. No religious faith can maintain itself in defiance of the experience which it supposedly interprets" (Christianity and Power Politics: 6).

2. Is Niebuhr right about this? Certainly, the argument he offers in support of his claim is not very tight. How we use forms of religious faith is one question, how they are properly used, another. But if his point is that any form of religious faith is supposed to interpret our experience and, therefore, is properly used to do exactly that, then I would incline to agree with him. If it is correct that any instance of Christian witness makes or implies the claim to be adequate to its content and, therefore, to be both appropriate to Jesus Christ and credible to human existence, then there are, indeed, two criteria, if not of "heresy," which Niebuhr uses rather loosely, then of the adequacy of Christian witness; and one of these finally comes down to "conformity to the facts of experience." For just as conformity to normative Christian witness is the test of appropriateness to Jesus Christ, so conformity to the facts of experience is the test of credibility to human existence.

3. Of course, if the question of heresy is limited to the question of the appropriateness of witness, conformity to the facts of experience could hardly be a criterion. But just as "orthodoxy" connotes not only appropriateness to Jesus Christ as tested by conformity to normative Christian witness, but also credibility to human existence as tested by the facts of our common human experience, so "heresy" seems to connote falsity as tested by the facts of experience as well as inappropriateness as tested by the norm of Christian witness.

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