

Religiosity and the Christian Faith

by Reinhold Niebuhr

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The "unknown god" in America seems to be faith itself. Our politicians are always admonishing the people to have "faith." Sometimes they seem to imply that faith is in itself redemptive. Sometimes this faith implies faith in something. That something is usually an idol, rather than the "God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ," who both judges and has mercy upon sinful men and nations. Sometimes we are asked to have faith in ourselves, sometimes to have faith in humanity, sometimes to have faith in America. Sometimes it is hope, rather than faith, which is really intended. We are to have hope that we will win the "cold war" or that the "cold war" will not break out into an atomic conflict.

These provisional hopes are no doubt rather better than despair, for desperate actions and policies are generated in despair. But the objects of faith are almost always idolatrous. For whether it is in ourselves, or in mankind, or in civilization, or in America, that we are asked to have faith, the admonition always points to an object of faith which is less than God and which certainly does not deserve unreserved commitment or adoration. The question is whether a generation which has lost its faith in all the gods of the nineteenth century, that is, in "history," or "progress," or "enlightenment," or the "perfectibility of man," is not expressing its desire to believe in something, to be committed somehow, even though it is not willing to be committed to a God who can be known only through repentance, and whose majesty judges all human pretensions. It is precisely faith in this God which is avoided in all this religiosity. A nation as powerful and as fortunate as ours is not inclined to worship a God before whom "the nations are as a drop in the bucket," and "who bringeth princes to naught." Our modern religiosity, in short, expresses various forms of self-worship. It is a more specifically religious ethos than the so-called "secular" faiths which history in our tragic age has refuted. The strategy seems to be to bring the discredited pagan gods in Christian disguises, hoping that the traditional piety may be merged with the secular forms of self-confidence.

The cause of this procedure seems to be that we are so sure of ourselves, of our power and of our virtue, and yet we are not sure of our destiny at all. We live on the edge of an abyss, and at any moment our private securities may be swallowed in the world-wide insecurity. The religiosity which seems to correspond to this combination of self-esteem and anxiety would seem to be a secular faith clothed in traditional terms. The most disquieting aspect of such religiosity is that it is frequently advanced by popular leaders of the Christian church and is not regarded as a substitute, but as an interpretation of that faith. The gospel admonition, "Repent ye, for the

kingdom of heaven is at hand," is a challenge to submit all our achievements and ambitions and hopes to a much higher judge than those judges who support our self-esteem. This admonition would seem to have little affinity with the "power of positive thinking."

It is significant that although this modern religiosity makes for self-esteem, particularly collective self-esteem, the nation is helped to find and to hold its rightful place in the perilous position of leadership in the alliance of free nations by many shrewd and critical "secular" thinkers who help us to weigh our responsibilities and judge the hazards of the task in which we are engaged. One must come to the conclusion that religion per se and faith per se are not virtuous, or a cause of virtue. The question is always what the object of worship is, and whether the worship tends to break the pride of the self so that a truer self may arise, either individually or collectively. If worship and faith do not serve this rebirth of men and of nations they are the source of confusion. We can therefore take no satisfaction in the pervasive religiosity of our nation. Much of it is a perversion of the Christian gospel. It aggravates, rather than mitigates, the problems of a very successful people.

It will be remembered that the prophet Jeremiah was worried about the false prophets who did not speak "the word of the Lord" but spoke their own dreams and imaginations. He had a test for detecting false prophecy. The false prophet was one who accentuated complacency and promised those who despised God, "You shall have assured peace in this place." It is as difficult in our day as in the day of Jeremiah to preach "the word of the Lord," for that runs counter to the complacency of men and of nations. It is sharper than a "two edged sword." It must hurt before it can heal.