FIVE TYPES OF JUDAISM?
REFLECTIONS ON THE INNER LOGIC
OF JUDAISM AS REVEALED BY NIEBUHR’S PHENOMENOLOGICAL TYPOLOGY*

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H. Richard Niebuhr’s *Christ and Culture* is a remarkable work, a kind of summing-up, in 1949, of many decades of theological reflection, by one of the leading Christian thinkers of the last century (Niebuhr lived from 1894 to 1962). It takes the form of a brilliant phenomenological assessment of what it calls the five basic and recurring types of Christianity, analyzing each in terms of its relationship to wider culture and society. Each type is discussed with a sympathetic but also critical balance, in an unpretentious style, clearly reflecting a life-time of reading and reflection on Niebuhr’s own religious tradition and his dialogues with other Christian theologians. One does not have to share the author’s religion or theoretical assumptions, nor even his specific conclusions, to admire the learning and wisdom of his observations.

As Jacob Neusner remarks, Niebuhr’s overview calls out for a similar reflection on Judaism. But this immediately evokes some caveats, too. I have been asked to comment as a phenomenologist on Neusner’s account of the Rabbinic evidence, not Niebuhr’s theory itself. However, Niebuhr’s study is naturally a deeply Christian work. This is so not merely in its explicit affirmations and sympathies but also in its founding definitions and implicit assumptions, the things it takes for granted and hardly discusses at all. Just these things may lead us astray if we wish to apply Niebuhr’s schema to other religions, so I am forced to consider certain of Niebuhr’s own claims before going on to apply them to the Jewish evidence.


1 H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (London: Faber and Faber, Ltd., n.d.), reproducing in expanded form the series of lectures the author gave at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Austin, Texas, in January, 1949. All page references in the text below are to this first edition.
As so often when dealing with Christian thinkers, how Judaism is treated in Niebuhr’s book takes us quickly to the heart of the matter, giving crucial clues to some of the basic problems with his general analysis even of Christianity itself. This essay will therefore first briefly discuss some of the problems with Niebuhr’s conception of Judaism, which reflect and even are sources of his basic definitions of religion and culture, so as to liberate us for a more fruitful modification and application of his phenomenological typology to Judaism.

Redefining Judaism and Therefore “Culture”

According to Niebuhr, the basic antithesis of “Christ” and “Culture” was established by Jesus in his confrontation with Jewish culture (p. 18). For support, Niebuhr quotes the Jewish scholar Joseph Klausner’s assertions that while Jesus was a product of Jewish culture and said nothing that cannot be found elsewhere in Jewish writings, nevertheless he “imperiled Jewish civilization” by his otherworldly conception of the Kingdom of God and “by abstracting religion and ethics from the rest of social life” (loc. cit.). As Niebuhr cites Klausner, “Jesus came and thrust aside all the requirements of the national life” (p. 19): instead of reforming society he ignored it or sought to abolish the connection between religion and national culture. Instances of this are Jesus’ refusal to judge adulterers, prohibition on divorce, praise of celibates, and even advocacy of the “toilless life exemplified by birds and lilies” (loc. cit.). Since Judaism is “a national religion,” in which religion and culture are identified, Jews inevitably rejected Jesus, according to Klausner and Niebuhr (pp. 19, 20, 54). If Niebuhr has any reservations about the simple either-or of Klausner he does not expand on them but moves on to Christian ambivalent relations with pagan cultures.

In a later discussion of Paul, Niebuhr asserts that “all cultural institutions were relativized” for the Apostle, including trust in the Torah, whether it stressed ritual observances or the keeping of ethical laws. Both the knowledge that found its basis in reason, and the one that looked to revelation for its foundation, were equally remote from the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. Christ destroyed the wisdom of the wise and the righteousness of the good, which had rejected him in different ways but to the same degree (p. 165).