

“Reinhold Niebuhr’s Ethical Dualism”

9 May 1952
[Boston, Mass.]

In this essay for DeWolf’s Seminar in Systematic Theology, King examines Niebuhr’s views both on the role of love and justice in society and on the tension between individual and corporate ethics. He agrees with Niebuhr’s critique of the most idealistic forms of perfectionism but criticizes his pessimism about the transforming power of agape. “He is right,” King wrote, “in insisting that we must be realistic regarding the relativity of every moral and ethical choice,” but Niebuhr failed “to see that the availability of the divine Agape is an essential affirmati[on] of the Christian religion.” DeWolf gave the essay an A – and commented: “Excellent interpretation and exposition. I wish the critical evaluation had been carried further. The beginning looked promising.”

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One of the perennial problems facing the ethical theorist is to find the relation between individual and group ethics. Certainly there is no easy solution. However, a few thinkers have courageously faced this difficult problem. Among those in the modern world to face this problem is the brilliant and influential theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr. In partly solving this problem he resorts to a formula of "dualistic ethics." In the present paper, it is our purpose to discuss this ethical dualism in the thinking of Niebuhr.

Factors Leading to Ethical Dualism

For some years a minister in Detroit under the shadow of the Ford factories, Niebuhr was overwhelmed by the appalling injustices evident in modern industrial civilization, and particularly by the concentration of power and resources in the hands of a relatively small wealthy class. Economic power, he declared, in modern society has "become the source of more injustice than any other, because the private ownership of the productive processes and the increased centralization of the resultant power in the hands of a few, make inevitably for irresponsibility."* Adequate housing for the poor "can never be initiated within the limits of private enterprise." Social work itself accepts "philanthropy as a substitute for real justice," and though it pretends to be scientific is little better than the "most sentimental religious generosity."† Irresponsible power leads inevitably to injustice "no matter how intelligent the person who wields it." Hence the real problem cannot be solved by increasing social intelligence and humanitarian sentiments, but "only by setting the power of the exploited against the exploiters."‡ In industrial society "equalitarianism becomes a more and more compelling social philosophy" because of inequality which periodically results in economic chaos. And though the workers may in due time "develop a social strategy which will horrify every middle-class idealist," it is to the modern proletariat that "the future in an industrial civilization undoubtedly belongs."§

* CRSW, 77

† CRSW, 80

‡ Ibid, 82

§ Ibid, 83, 84, 87

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Along with all of this Niebuhr noticed a terrible contrast between "moral man and immoral society." He observed a great distinction between the relatively decent, good behavior of man as an individual and

man as society. His analysis of this contrast led him to the roots of the contradiction of human nature. He cogently states,

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Individual men may be moral in the sense that they are able to consider interests other than their own in determining problems of conduct, and are capable, on occasion, of preferring the advantages of others to their own . . . But all these achievements are more difficult, if not impossible, for human societies and social groups. In every human group there is less reason to guide and to check impulse, less capacity for self transcendence, less ability to comprehend the need of others and therefore more unrestrained egoism than the individuals, who compose the groups, reveal in their personal relationships.*

* MMIS, 11, 12

In these words, Niebuhr stresses the fact of the morality of man the individual, and the immorality of man the collective. Man the individual is natively equipped with certain unselfish impulses.† He also has a conscience which is his sense of obligation to what he judges to be good. And yet, when men engage in collective activity they are overwhelmed by moral inability. The goodness of the individual man in his immediate relationships disappears when he acts as a member of a group.‡

† Ibid, 25 ff.

‡ Ibid, 14, 34 ff.

Niebuhr came to see that reason could never solve the problem. While he concludes that reason may restrain natural egoism,§ and guide the imagination into productive channels|| and harmonize conflicting impulses;# he insists that it cannot compete in power with the impulses and that it must, therefore, be combined with emotion and will.** Furthermore, he thinks that reason is unconsciously the instrument of egoism.

§ Ibid, 37

|| Ibid, 27f; CRSW, 68ff.

Ibid, 28f

** REE, 264f

It becomes the agent of egoism under the impression that it is transcending it.††

†† MMIS, 95

Niebuhr came to see that the complexity which results from this conflict between individual morality and societal morality is staggering, and all hope of finding a simple moral program to cover both the individual and collective mind vanishes. The group lacks the organs of sensitivity of the individual. It is at this point that Niebuhr turns to ethical dualism as a way out.

Agape, which remains a law for the individual as a vertical reference, must suffer in purity when taken into social relations. Agape is at best a regulative social norm.** It sets the outside definition of ideal jus-

** ICE, 149

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9 May 1952 tice as well as tempering whatever realistic means must be employed to dynamite recalcitrant centers of pride and injustice. Love remains a leaven in society, permeating the whole and giving texture and consistency to life. The balanced Christian, therefore, must be both loving and realistic. As an individual who in moments of prayerful self-transcendence has been justified by faith, he given final allegiance to Christ; but as an individual in complex social relations he must realistically meet mind with mind and power with power. In life two perspectives always vie for primacy.

One focus is in the inner life of the individual, and

the other in the necessities of man's social life. From the perspective of the individual the highest ideal is unselfishness. Society must strive for justice even if it is forced to use means, such as self-assertion, resistance, coercion and perhaps resentment, which cannot gain the moral sanction of the most sensitive moral spirit. The individual must strive to realize his life by losing and finding himself in something greater than himself.*

* MMIS, 257

The Christian, being in though not of this world, is never fully free from the complexities of acting as a vicar of Christ in his intentional life and a social and political agent in his actual life. The more aggressively one relates the gospel to life, the more sensitively he realizes that the social unit can accommodate only justice, not agape.†

† ICE, 144f

Agape is always a possibility/impossibility. It remains perennially relevant in society as the regulative principle of morals, but it is realized in society only through infinite degrees of justice. Niebuhr states:

A rational analysis reveals both the ideal possibility and the actual situation from which one must begin. In that sense there are really two natural laws—that which reason commands ultimately and the compromise which reason makes with the contingent and arbitrary forces of human existence. The ideal possibility is really an impossibility, a fact to which both Stoic and Christian doctrine do justice by the myth of the Golden Age in Stoic doctrine and the age of perfection before the Fall in Christian doctrine. The ideal is an impossibility because both the contingencies of nature and the sin in the human heart prevent men from ever living in that perfect freedom and equality which the whole logic of the moral life demands. . . . yet this impossibility is not one which can be relegated

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* Ibid, 147-148. "The Christian religion is thus an ethical religion in which the optimism, necessary for the ethical enterprise, and the pessimism, consequent upon profound religious insights, never achieve a perfect equilibrium or harmony." REE, 213

† ICE, 51

‡ MMIS, 48

simply to the world of transcendence. It offers immediate possibilities of a higher good in every given situation.*

Niebuhr freely admits that justice is morally inferior to equality in love, but one still has the moral responsibility to choose a "second best." One must realistically adjust himself to the fact that the ethic which controls the individual cannot inform the group. The individual ethic "is oriented by only one vertical religious reference, to the will of God; and the will of God is defined in terms of all-inclusive love."† Consequently, the group lacks the organs of self-transcendence to understand agape. And "the larger the group the more difficult it is to achieve a common mind and purpose and the more inevitably will it be unified by momentary impulses and immediate and unreflective purposes."‡ Justice is a this-worldly value; agape is an eternal value which only the initiated understand and strive for.

Niebuhr makes it quite clear, however, that justice is never discontinuously related to love. Justice is a negative application of love. Whereas love seeks out the needs of others, justice limits freedom to prevent its infringement upon the rights and privileges of others. Justice is a check (by force, if necessary) upon ambitions of individuals seeking to overcome their own insecurity at the expense of others. Justice is love's message for the collective mind.¹

In a struggle between those who enjoy inordinate privileges and those who lack the basic essentials of the good life it is fairly clear that a religion which holds love to be the final law of life stupefies itself if it does not support equal justice as a political and economic approximation of the ideal of love . . . The relativity of all moral ideals cannot absolve us of the necessity and duty of choosing between relative values; and that the choice is sometimes so clear as to become an imperative one.§

§ ICE, 131

Niebuhr senses that neither liberal nor orthodox Christianity has fully understood the relation between love, justice, and a dualistic theory of ethics. Orthodoxy, while properly sensing the inevitability of

1. DeWolf commented at the bottom of this paragraph, "Good, clear exposition."

9 May 1952 sin in the world and the consequent defeat of pure love as a moral force, inclines to be pessimistic about the cultural possibilities of love. It tends to withdraw from the world in preference to interacting in it. Christian orthodoxy "failed to derive any significant politico-moral principles from the law of love . . . It therefore destroyed a dynamic relationship between the ideal of love and the principles of justice."* Orthodoxy has not yet found the exact relation of justice to love. Individual perfection is too often made an end in itself.

* Ibid, 144

The liberal ethic, contends Niebuhr, is a religious expression of the Renaissance fallacy. Enlightened on the law of love, but insensitive to the inevitability of sin in history, liberalism vainly seeks to overcome justice though purely moral and rational suasions. "The unvarying refrain of the liberal church in its treatment of politics is that love and cooperation are superior to conflict and coercion, and that therefore they must be and will be established."† Liberalism confuses the ideal itself with the realistic means which must be employed to coerce society into an approximation of that ideal. Perfect justice will not come by a simple statement of the moral superiority of brotherhood in the world, for men are controlled by power, not mind alone. This liberalism failed to see. He states:

† ICE, 176

If the liberal Church had had less moral idealism and more religious realism its approach to the political problem would have been less inept and fatuous. Liberal solutions of the social problem never take the permanent difference between man's collective behavior and the moral ideals of an individual life into consideration. Very few seem to recognize that even in the individual there is a law in his members which wars against the law that is in his mind.‡

‡ Ibid, 178-179

The Inevitability of Government

Just as the Christian must become realistic in ethics, so, Niebuhr contends, he must become realistic in his attitude toward the power which employs force to coerce justice. If agape were a historical reality in the lives of men, government, ideally, would be unnecessary, since forceful suasions are irrelevant wherever a love for God is perfected. The man who loves will

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naturally prefer the needs and securities of his neighbor. Actually, however, government is very necessary, for men inevitably corrupt their potentialities of love through a lust for self-security which outruns natural needs. Men must be restrained by force, else they will swallow up their neighbors in a desperate effort to make themselves secure. In this sense government is approved of God. "Government is divinely ordained and morally justified because a sinful world would, without the restraints of the state, be reduced to anarchy by its evil lusts."* The force of sinfulness is so stubborn a characteristic of human nature that it can only be restrained when the social unit is armed with both moral and physical might.

* REE, 220

Niebuhr makes it quite clear that government, although holy as an instrument for restraining the sinful, must never be looked upon as divine. The individuals reverence for government extends only as far as the purpose for which that unit was created. When the government pretends to be divine, the Christian serves God rather than man. The Christian must constantly maintain a "dialectical" attitude toward government while the collective ego remains within its bounds, while being critical whenever these bounds are overpassed.

While Niebuhr contends that the ambiguity of government is deeply embedded in every conceivable political form, he makes it clear that some political cohesions expose a greater surface of self-criticism than others. Critical insight reveals, he affirms, that the most desirable cohesion is democracy, even as the least desirable is totalitarianism. "For certainly one perennial justification for democracy is that it arms the individual with political and constitutional power to resist the inordinate ambition of rulers, and to check the tendency of the community to achieve order at the price of liberty."†

† CLCD, 46

Pragmatically, therefore, though not absolutely, democracy is the most satisfactory form of collective rule. Its adequacy lies in the measure in which it realistically lends itself to the dialectical relation between time and eternity. "An adequate approach to the social and moral problem must include a political policy which will bring the most effective social check upon conflicting egoistic impulses in society."‡ Democracy anticipates in its normal operation the right of the individual to criticize the rules. Impeachment is the final expression of this right.

‡ REE, 229

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It is the highest achievement of democratic societies that they embody the principle of resistance to government within the principle of government itself. The citizen is thus armed with constitutional power to resist the unjust exaction of government. He can do this without creating anarchy within the community, if government has been so conceived that criticism of the rules becomes an instrument of better government and not a threat to government itself.*

* NDM, II, 268

Niebuhr admits that there is risk in arming men with the power of resistance, but he sees the alternative risk as worse. If society is not empowered with rights to free expression, it will explode from internal combustion.

Niebuhr makes it clear that a perfect democracy is just as impossible to reach as either a perfect society or a perfect individual. The evils of democracy are patent. The most self-evident is, according to Niebuhr, that democracy is founded on an initial deception. [~~strikeout illegible~~] {See paragraph at the end.}² Niebuhr sees the salvation of both democracy and capitalism in the continual reshuffling of its centers of power until a perceptible increase of justice and equality is evidenced.

Before closing this discussion, we might say just a word about Niebuhr's defense of the balance-of-power strategy. It might be remembered that Niebuhr's dialectic makes him unqualifiedly pessimistic about the future of things. "As long as the character and nature of man is not changed into something now quite unknown in human history, neither a new and more perfect social pedagogy nor a more perfect social organization will be able to eliminate all possibilities of injustice and conflict in human society."† But he is likewise unqualifiedly optimistic about our responsibility to maintain the best possible order as a "second best." This realistic compromise is the balance of power. Morally inferior to either a moral and rational form of collective cohesions or the community of love, it nevertheless is our only realistic expedient to promote justice. "The very essence of politics is the achievement of justice through equilibria of power. A balance of power is not conflict, but a tension between opposing forces underlies it. Where

† REE, 243

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* ICE, 189

there is tension there is potential conflict, and where there is conflict there is potential violence.”*

† MMIS, 272

The balance-of-power strategy turns on the inevitability of strife through a sinful assertion in both individual and collective minds. “The selfishness of human communities must be regarded as an inevitability. Where it is inordinate it can be checked only by competing assertions of interest.”† Through the expedient of balancing power against power the pretensions of a collective ego are checked. One power is brought to bay through an equally ambitious power over against it. Balance of power “is in fact a kind of managed anarchy.”‡

‡ CLCD, 174

§ Ibid, 175

Since “no participant in a balance is ever quite satisfied with its own position,”§ the balance is always precarious. Niebuhr has no fond illusion either of the moral worth of this solution or of its resulting problems. The best he can proffer is a realistic approach to a wretchedly complex situation, believing only that within the terms of a dialectic balance of righteous and unrighteous insights can the probability of either anarchy or tyranny be lessened.

|| Hughley, J. Neal, TPSI,
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In the following remarkably concise way Hughley has charted Niebuhr’s solution: ||

1. That the struggle for social justice is always involved in a contest of power. It is never a question or mere morality versus power
 - (a) Because all contending groups lay claim to right; to morality, giving moral justification to their position or demands.
 - (b) Because men are always power-seekers, even the most moral of them. Even their ‘ideals’ express themselves in a quest for power.
 - (c) Because groups are even more concerned for power (less for morality) than individuals, and thus justice becomes a question of continual adjustment of group claims.
2. That the essence of social justice is a full consideration of the claims of all parties, with every system of justice resulting from compromise. No contending group can have all it wants or contends for, and hence must be restrained by force in its selfish aspiration.
3. That achievement of justice is dependent upon a relative equality of power (or balance of power), for
 - (a) Where vast disproportions of power exist,

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justice is a mockery—it becomes the will of the mighty. The system of order resulting is merely the law of the ruling power which never fully considers the claims of the weaker.

- (b) Where equality of power exists all contenders get a hearing because the power of an opponent always tends to check one's pretensions and claims.
4. A structure of justice based on a balance of power is morally inferior to a community of love. But corrupt human nature will require a rough balance to the end of time. To imagine otherwise is to be victimized by illusions concerning man and social processes.

Conclusion

The strength of Dr. Niebuhr's position lies in its critique of the easy conscience and complacency of some forms of perfectionism.³ He is right, it seems to me, in insisting that we must be realistic regarding the relativity of every moral and ethical choice. His analysis of the complexity of the social situation is profound indeed, and with it I would find very little to disagree. But there is one weakness in Niebuhr's ethical position which runs the whole gamut of his writings. This weakness lies in {the} inability of his system to deal adequately with the relative perfection which is the fact of the Christian life. How one can develop spiritually; by what powers Christian values are conceived in personality; and how the immanence of Agape is to be concretely conceived in human nature and history—all these problems are left unsolved by Niebuhr.⁴ He fails to see that the availability of the divine Agape is an essential affirmatim of the Christian religion. In an article on Niebuhr's conception of

3. Walter G. Muelder, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Conception of Man," *The Personalist* 26 (July 1945): 291: "The strength of this position lies in its critique of the easy conscience and the complacency of some forms of perfectionism."

4. Muelder, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Conception of Man," pp. 291–292: "But its weakness resides in its inability to deal adequately with the relative perfection which is the fact of the Christian life. How there can be development in the spiritual life of the self; by what powers Christian values are conserved in personality; . . . and how the immanence of Agape in human nature and history is to be concretely conceived—all these issues are left unresolved."

man, Dean Muelder has made a statement that is well worth our quoting at this point.⁵ He says:

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There is a Christian perfectionism which may be called a prophetic meliorism, which, while it does not presume to guarantee future willing, does not bog down in pessimistic imperfectionism. Niebuhr's treatment of much historical perfectionism is well-founded criticism from an abstract ethical viewpoint, but it hardly does justice to the constructive historical contributions of the perfectionist sects within the Christian fellowship and even within the secular order. There is a kind of Christian assurance which releases creative energy into the world and which in actual fellowship rises above the conflicts of individual and collective egoism.*

* Muelder, Art. (1945)

Despite this criticism, we must cordially thank Dr. Niebuhr for giving us a stimulating and profound ethical theory. It is an interpretation with which we must reckon, and contains much of permanent value.

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5. At this time Walter G. Muelder was dean of Boston University's School of Theology.

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5 July
1952

Articles

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6. The last two entries in the bibliography are in King’s own hand.