

In Niebuhr's view, the death of the subject of love seems to be a *necessary* condition of love's being fully realized. Thus he says, "love can be fully realized only at the expense of life itself" (*Reinhold Niebuhr on Politics*: 136). But doesn't he also tend to assume—however unwarrantedly—that "the expense of life itself" is a *sufficient* condition of love's being fully realized? It seems clear that he does, since otherwise "the history of martyrdom" could hardly prove, as he says it does, that "the perfect good," which is "perfect love," is "not beyond our possibilities" (*Essays in Applied Christianity*: 132).

But I should question whether "the expense of life itself" can be either a necessary or a sufficient condition of love's being fully realized. If the good, in principle, is harmony or unity in variety, then the sacrifice of any part of the harmony—as distinct from its harmonization with all the other parts—must be something less than the good. Therefore, the sacrifice of the self's life for others—unless it be the least possible diminution of the good under the circumstances—is a violation not only of all "natural standards of morals," but of any conceivable moral standards (*RNP*: 137).

Similarly, Niebuhr accepts uncritically as "quite true" that "Christians must accept suffering instead of inflicting it so far as personal relations are concerned" (142). But this can hardly be correct, especially if he's right that every individual depends on others to find fulfillment and that no one is ever simply an individual person without relations to others. The subject of "personal relations" is always related to other persons who are bound to be harmed or diminished by her or his acceptance of suffering

10 August 2003