

I find it interesting that Niebuhr again and again appeals to what is “ideally” the case, or to “the ideal possibility.” Thus he can say, for instance, “Ideally religion is the force which brings all individual action and vitalities into a total harmony by subjecting them all to the realm of meaning” (*Reinhold Niebuhr on Politics*: 128). Or he can say, “The ideal possibility is that faith in the ultimate security of God’s love will overcome all immediate insecurities of nature and history” (75).

If the second statement may be most reasonably interpreted as belonging to an explicitly Christian or “theological” context of meaning, and thus as presupposing a specifically Christian understanding of existence, this is hardly true of the first statement, whose context is evidently more abstract, abstracting from anything and everything specifically Christian and being concerned to clarify the meaning of “religion and action” in a purely general, formal, “philosophical” way. But, then, what could allow one, in *that* context, to speak, as Niebuhr does, of what is “ideally” the case, if not something like a proper philosophical (including metaphysical) theology? Were he simply to appeal to what is “ideally” the case, or “the ideal possibility,” as understood from a specifically Christian standpoint, his whole argument would be as confused as it would be confusing, and the question of the credibility of a Christian understanding of existence could only be begged, never answered.

And yet Niebuhr can again and again say or imply that Christianity is “a religion which apprehends the truth about man and God by faith alone” because “the truth which is held by faith” is “beyond all human attainment” (128). Perhaps one possibility of composing the obvious self-contradiction this introduces would be to gloss “beyond all human attainment” in the same way in which Niebuhr sometimes glosses such phrases as “beyond all human possibilities,” “impossible possibility,” and so on—namely, as meaning, not beyond all human attainments *simpliciter*, but only beyond all human attainments *conventionally understood*, or insofar as they are limited by the facts of human finiteness and sinfulness.

It may be worth remembering in this connection that it is essential to Niebuhr's theology to insist both that man never falls so far as to completely lose his sense of justice, and that "common grace" is ever at work throughout all human life in the form of "every force in life and history which persuades and beguiles self-centered man to forget himself and to realize himself by letting go of himself and seeking the good of his fellows" (71 f.).

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