Niebuhr's position on the whole issue of "pragmatism vs. principle" in Christian ethics is as interesting as it is subtle.

On the one hand, he can say, over against traditional Roman Catholic views, " I do not believe that the only escape from moral nihilism is to be found in the inflexible propositions of 'natural law'; particularly not when these propositions become very detailed and commend some principle (such as prohibition of birth control or the absolute prohibition of divorce) as a moral standard fixed by God's eternal law. No one could convince me that birth control would not be advantageous, in Italy, India, and some other overpopulated nations" (*Essays in Applied Christianity*: 248).

On the other hand, he can criticize "Barth's teachings," because they "seem to mean that we can, as Christians, dispense with the principles of justice which, however faulty, represent the cumulative experience of the race in dealing with the vexing problems of man's relations to his fellows. We ought indeed to have a greater degree of freedom from all traditions, even the most hallowed, as we seek to establish and re-establish community in our torn world. But freedom over law cannot mean emancipation from the torturous and difficult task of achieving a tolerable justice" (171). Or, again, Niebuhr sharply criticizes Barth's "extreme pragmatism, which disavows all moral principles." "A little concern for 'principles,'" he insists, "would have instructed Barth that some of the barbarism of Nazism was derived from the same monopoly of irresponsible power from which the barbarism of Communism is derived. Looking at every event afresh means that one is ignorant about the instructive, though inexact, analogies of history which the 'godless' scientists point out for our benefit. . . . Barth's view makes no provision for discriminating judgments, both because of its strong eschatological emphasis and because of the absence of principles and structures of value" (186 f.).

As for his own position, two passages in particular reveal his intentions. "Perhaps nothing," he suggests in one of them, "is more important in the ethical reorientation of modern Christianity than a new study of the doctrine of natural

law. Love perfectionism is clearly no specific guide for the detailed problems which arise in human society. No society has ever existed without some degree of coercion and it is better to recognize that fact than to obscure the realities with idealistic phrases which permit privileged people to benefit from covert coercion while they stand in abhorrence of the overt resistance of the underprivileged" (154). And in the other he concludes: "We dare not disavow general standards of justice. But neither must we give ourselves to the illusion that they are either easily defined or simply realized. Some of our worst social evils are derived, not from the cynics, who acknowledge no standard but their own, but from the fanatics who acknowledge an absolute standard but fail to detect the corruption of self-interest in their definition of the absolute" (214 f.).

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