

When Niebuhr talks about love, he most naturally and commonly seems to mean, not a certain way in which a self relates to God, neighbors, and itself, but a certain kind of community or society among selves—*that* kind, namely, in which communal or social cohesion is characterized by voluntary co-operation, rather than by conflict and coercion. Thus he says that "the law of love" is a law "in the sense that it states the basic requirement of the aggregate existence of humankind. Ideally, a healthy social life is one in which every part, individual and collective, finds its rightful place in the harmony of the whole and serves the commonweal without coercion. Indeed, every social harmony which falls short of perfect love has the seeds of anarchy and death in it. . . . The law of love is really the law of life. It is a basic requirement of human existence which men transgress at their peril. Every transgression disturbs and imperils the social harmony of human existence" (*Reinhold Niebuhr on Politics [RNP]*: 133 f.).

Or, again, he offers, as an alternative expression for "the law of love," "the law which is derived from the mutual dependence of persons" (125). In the same vein, "the law of love" can function as a virtual synonym for "the ideal of community and brotherhood" (127). Indeed, the very fact that Niebuhr can represent "the law of love" (or "the ideal of love") as both "a principle of indiscriminate criticism upon all approximations of justice" and "a principle of discriminate criticism between forms of justice" fully confirms that it can only refer to an ideal form of human community. Given his use of terms, it is precisely a *community* that more or less falls short of "the law of love" (*Christianity and Power Politics*: 22, 26; cf. also *RNP*: 178, where Niebuhr speaks of "a complete love in which each life affirms the interests of the other").

Thus Niebuhr's distinction between love and justice is the distinction between two kinds of community, or, since community consists in the harmony of individuals, between two kinds of harmonies: (1) "the perfect harmonies of fully co-ordinated wills"; and (2) "the tolerable harmonies of balanced interests and mutually recognized claims" (*RNP*: 164).

On my usage, by contrast, "love" refers, not to an ideal form of human community or society, but to the transcendental level of human action, or,

alternatively, to the relatively more "active," as distinct from the relatively more "passive," aspect of an authentic self-understanding, and thus to a certain way in which a self relates to God and to other selves as well as to itself. "Justice," for me, then, far from referring to another morally inferior form of human community, refers to the categorial level of action, i.e., life-praxis, and thus to action, specifically political as well as generally moral, directed toward securing what belongs to others (*suum cuique*).

7 June 1999