

Any doubts about the originally—and continuingly—empirical bent of Niebuhr's mind are dispelled by his statement *vis-à-vis* Barth's alleged "dogmatism": "We can escape relativity and uncertainty only by piling experience upon experience, checking hypothesis against hypothesis, correcting errors by considering new perspectives, and finally by letting the experience of the race qualify the individual's experience of God" (*Essays in Applied Christianity*: 145). Or consider his later statement in *Christianity and Power Politics*: 6: "All forms of religious faith are principles of interpretation which we use to organize our experience. Some religions may be adequate principles of interpretation at certain levels of experience, but they break down at deeper levels. No religious faith can maintain itself in defiance of the experience which it supposedly interprets." Hence: "It is important to recognize this lack of conformity to the facts of experience as a criterion of heresy." (Note, by the way, the "all-some-none" structure of this last statement.)

Given this clearly and emphatically empirical outlook, it becomes relevant to ask just what Niebuhr means by such typical statements as the following: "This [*sc.* knowledge of faith] is a wisdom beyond human knowledge, but not contrary to human experience. ^{One} known, the truth of the gospel explains our experiences which remain inexplicable on any other level. Through it we are able to understand life in all of its beauty and its terror, without being beguiled by its beauty or driven to despair by its terror" (214). In what sense is the knowledge of faith, or "the truth of the gospel," as Niebuhr says, "beyond human knowledge"? Certainly, the impression one gets is that it is beyond human knowledge in the sense that, given the fact of human sin, man's own attempts to explain his experiences (this being what Niebuhr tacitly assumes to be meant by 'knowledge') invariably *mis*explain them. There is, as he says elsewhere, an "ideological taint" in all human knowledge. But if this is what Niebuhr means, his answer is open to the objections: (1) that there obviously *can* be a nonideological statement of the truth of the gospel (his own theology being *prima facie* proof of this); and (2) that one can understand such a statement even if one does not accept it by oneself making the decision of faith.

Thus one is led to ask whether Niebuhr's meaning may not be different—namely, that “the truth of the gospel” in the first instance is not something to be *known* so much as it is something to be *done*, a matter of *existential*, as distinct from merely *intellectual*, knowledge. Thus, whatever one may know intellectually, even if it is impeccably orthodox, “the truth of the gospel” is that one is saved by God's grace, not by oneself—not because, given sin, one could never do what alone could save one, but because God alone can save, the very attempt to try to save oneself being the most fundamental meaning of “sin.”

The impression that again and again comes home to me is that, for all of his efforts to distinguish between “moral peace” and “religious peace” (19), Niebuhr never really breaks through to the insight that they are, after all, qualitatively different things, related to one another as part is to whole, etc. Thus, when he speaks (following Troeltsch) of “love universalism and love perfectionism” (8), he evidently thinks of “the law of love,” which is “not just another law, but a law which transcends all law” (9), as nevertheless *continuous* with, lying on the same level as, “the schemes of justice which society has devised and whereby it prevents the worst forms of anti-social conduct” (24). This seems clear from the fact that Jesus' “love perfectionism” is taken to be “the ethic of the ‘Kingdom of God,’ in which no concession is made to human sin,” and hence as an ethic that “uncompromisingly enjoins non-resistance and not non-violent resistance” (10). Or, again, Niebuhr says, “it is the highest function of religion to create a sense of guilt, to make man conscious of the fact that his inadequacies are more than excusable limitations—that they are treason against his better self.” “It is the business of ^{religion} ~~reason~~ to create a sensitive conscience” (*Essays in Applied Christianity*: 143, 147). But then he goes on to say that “it is quite possible that such a religious consciousness of sin has the moral limitation that it preoccupies the soul with an ultimate problem of life to such a degree [*sic!*] that it loses interest in specific moral problems and struggles which must be faced day by day” (143), thereby showing unmistakably that the religious and the moral are seen to be continuous, since they are thus potentially in conflict with one another. “True religion does save man from moral conceit in the attainment of his relative goals. But if the sense of the absolute and transcendent becomes so

complete an obsession as it is in Barthian theology, all moral striving on the level of history is reduced to insignificance. It is good to survey history occasionally [*sic!*] *sub specie æternitatis*, but it is not wholesome to the moral vigor of a people to make the eternal perspective the perpetual vantage point" (149). Clearly, the possible conflict Niebuhr envisages here between "the eternal perspective" and the perspective of day by day moral decisions is theologically intolerable, implying, as it does, that I can be "morally vigorous" only by *not* permitting myself to view my life *sub specie æternitatis*—and vice versa!

The same implication is evident in Niebuhr's talk of justice's "approximating" love, as though, again, they were both on the same level—the one being less or more of the other. "[T]he moral sensitivity and the lack of social vigor in Barthian thought flow from the same source, and that source is religious perfectionism. God, the will of God, and the Kingdom of God are conceived in such transcendent terms that nothing in history can even approximate [*sic!*] the divine; and the distinctions between good and evil on the historical level are in danger of being reduced to irrelevancies" (148). "The closest approximation [*sic!*] to a love in which life supports life in voluntary community is a justice in which life is prevented from destroying life and the interests of the one are guarded against unjust claims by the other" (*Christianity and Power Politics*: 26). In my view, all such talk of "approximation" is profoundly misleading, implying, as it does, that "the human" and "the divine," "justice" and "love," are continuous with one another.

In sum: what I find I want to say when I read Niebuhr is that he never breaks out of an essentially nonsocial into a genuinely social understanding of reality, according to which love is the social bond, and hence always and in principle *relational*, and so nothing that anyone could ever be or do in and by oneself. God's love is "a principle of indiscriminate criticism" because it loves *all things* as they are, and thus not only or primarily because the conflicts and controversies of life are always "between sinners and not between righteous men and sinners" (23)—true and important as that is—but because, in face of the ever-renewed gift and demand of God's love, whatever one has been and done is of

no consequence, righteousness and sin in the properly religious sense being matters not of what one already *is* but of what one now *becomes* in response to God's gift and demand. Just as all, moral or immoral, remain bound by death, and hence by their own nothingness; and just as all, moral or immoral, are freely granted eternal life by being accepted into God's own everlastingness, so all, in each new moment, are called beyond themselves to the ever-new gifts and tasks of love. On the other hand, God's love is "a principle of discriminate criticism" as between various forms of community and various attempts at justice in the sense that, in loving all things *as they are*, God wills certain possibilities as distinct from others as alone making for the then allowable fullest actualization of each and every creature.