

2001

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Recommended Citation

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Reinhold Niebuhr and Non-Resistance

Kevin Twain Lowery

By how gentle degrees does God prepare us either for doing or suffering His will! Two years since [the mobbing at Wednesbury], one threw at me a piece of brick, which grazed on my shoulder, but hurt me not. It was a year after, that another threw a stone, which struck me between the eyes; but the hurt was soon healed, and still no man had power to lay a hand upon me. At St. Ives, last month, I received one blow, the first ever I had, on the side of the head; and this night too, one before we came into the town, and one after I was gone out into the meadows. But though one man struck me on the breast with all his might, and the other on the mouth so that the blood gushed out, I felt no more pain from either of the blows, than if they had touched me with a straw.

(John Wesley, Wednesday, October 19, 1743.)¹

A significant theme in Reinhold Niebuhr's treatment of love and justice is non-resistance, and many of his remarks on the subject carry an impetus that would likely be regarded today as somewhat radical. Niebuhr would assert an ideal, often as an absolute, then he would paradoxically counter-balance it with some other consideration, one that is diametrically opposed to the ideal. Perhaps the methodology is one that seeks the highest degree of realism, yet Niebuhr would often leave the two in tension, not suggesting any resolution. This is exactly what he did in considering what the Christian response should be to receiving an injustice, if a response is merited at all. In this paper, I will try to lay out the paradox as Niebuhr saw it, after which I will introduce some other factors which impose limits upon Niebuhr's view. Lastly, I will forge what I consider to be a more practical ideal, out of which will emerge a basic Christian ethic of response to injustice or injury, and this ethic will be briefly evaluated in light of justice and love.

¹Wesley, John, "Modern Christianity Exemplified at Wednesbury," *Wesley's Works* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 1978), XIII, pp.192 f.

The Ethic of Entire Non-resistance

For Niebuhr, the human ideal and paragon of virtue is always Christ. He is our example of non-resistance. Christ's ethic was a personal ethic, one which begins within the self, moreover, it is "an ethic of love, and it therefore implied social relationships."² Christ does not resist the evil that is cast upon Him, else He would not be expressing love. In the loving act of non-resistance, Christ paves the way for social relationships, which cannot exist without love. Since the love of Christ is perfect love, it must be completely devoid of self-interest, "for love is purest where it desires no return for itself; and it is most potent where it is most purest.[sic]"³

Under this definition, the ultimate act of non-resistance is the cross, because it is the ultimate act of selflessness. As such, the cross is the ideal of the Christian ethic.⁴ It is only through the ultimate act of sacrifice that we can see the perfect love which is pure from self-interest and expresses itself, in the face of complete antagonism, through utter non-resistance. Yet the cross is more than a quixotic guidepost, it is the place where all must go in their pursuit of Christ; ". . . the end of pure goodness, of perfect love, is the cross."⁵

Nevertheless, the cross, albeit the ultimate act of perfect love and redemption for humanity, must be pursued in a world that is anything but perfect. We inhabit a realm that is characterized by self-interest, and in it the quest for selflessness is an impossibility.⁶ Every human act is tainted by self-centeredness, if not controlled by it altogether. The ideal of perfect love is one that is beyond our grasp. Nevertheless, it still

²Niebuhr, Reinhold, "The Ethic of Jesus and the Social Problem," in D. B. Robertson (ed.), *Love and Justice: Selections from the Shorted Writings of Reinhold Niebuhr* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1976), p. 30.

³Ibid., "The Conflict Between Individual and Social Morality," in Larry Rasmussen (ed.), *Reinhold Niebuhr* (London: Collins, 1988), p. 74.

⁴Ibid., "To Prevent the Triumph of an Intolerable Tyranny," *L&J*, p. 276.

⁵Ibid., p. 277.

⁶Ibid., "Justice and Love," *L&J*, p. 27.

remains the goal, therefore, the pursuit is not meaningless, but each one progresses closer and closer to the example of Christ.

Niebuhr characterizes the ethic of Christ with the term "disinterestedness," meaning "free from self-interest," not free from interest altogether. Within it, "no one was to seek his own." The perfect love of God epitomizes "disinterestedness" in that all persons are loved equally, impartially, and unconditionally. Nevertheless, the nature of love is such that the lover derives pleasure from the act of loving. It would thus appear that the act of loving could be one of self-interest after all. Niebuhr averts this charge of egoism by asserting that in disinterested action, the reward must be the by-product. "If [the reward] is desired, the purity of the action is destroyed."⁷

In light of the fact that the ideal is unattainable, many make the mistake of compromising the ideal. This cannot be done, in Niebuhr's mind, but the ideal of "pure disinterestedness" must be upheld so that "antisocial policies" and the "attitudes of privileged and powerful people" might be undermined.⁸ Besides, the ethic of Christ is "absolute and uncompromising," ultimately normative. "The injunctions 'resist not evil,' 'love your enemies,' 'if ye love them that love you what thanks have you?' 'be not anxious for your life,' and 'be ye therefore perfect as your father in heaven is perfect,' are all of one piece, and they are all uncompromising and absolute." To adapt the ethic to our standards and purposes is to reduce it to a type of legalism. The law of love is not one that is added to others, but is to be the overarching principle of all human activity.⁹

As much as lies within us, we must act disinterestedly and respond to adversity with non-resistance. This will inevitably lead us to the cross, in one respect, seeing that the cross symbolizes the perfection for which we strive. It is the ideal against which all else is measured. Additionally, the pursuit of disinterestedness comes by way of the cross because the disinterested act is one that is vulnerable to the selfishness of the world.

⁷Ibid., "The Ethic . . .," p. 31.

⁸Ibid., p.37.

⁹Ibid., "Pacifism," RN, pp. 240 f.

The person who takes the path of non-resistance often becomes the sacrifice for the self-interests that control "fallen" humanity.¹⁰

This is the only path toward true justice for Niebuhr. Since love never falls below justice, the pursuit of perfect love, being pure of self-interest, is the support which upholds justice. However, the elusiveness of the ideal likewise translates into justice and love never being fully realized. This makes the pursuit of them, rather than their full attainment, the pertinent issue.

Aspiring Sinners or Struggling Saints?

Although Niebuhr makes a strong case in supporting an ethic of entire non-resistance, it is not apparent that non-resistance necessarily be taken as an incontrovertible absolute. Even in the life of Christ, absolute non-resistance does not come to the forefront until His passion. On two separate occasions, Christ resisted efforts to do him harm. In Luke 4:29-30, a crowd tried to corner Christ at a cliff with the intention of throwing Him over, but he passed through and went His way. John 8:59 tells of a crowd picking up stones to execute Him, but He foiled their plan and escaped.

Before the time came for Christ to fulfill His passion, He had stayed out of the towns, especially Jerusalem where the scribes and Pharisees were plotting His death. Upon the death of Lazarus, He came out of hiding to perform His most climactic miracle, after which He entered Jerusalem in a triumphal procession. This would quickly exacerbate the growing opposition. During those times of hiding, Christ spoke of waiting for a certain time that would be coming, namely the time for His passion.¹¹ Christ resisted efforts to take Him into custody and/or to kill Him inasmuch as He took steps to oppose the plans of His enemies.

¹⁰Ibid., "The Ethic . . .," p. 33.

¹¹Mt. 26:18, 45; Lu. 13:35; Jn. 7:6, 8; 12:23 ff; 16:32.

Christ could also be classified as a maverick in other respects. He did not observe the "tradition of the elders," especially as it pertained to the observance of Sabbath. He healed on the Sabbath several times, and He went so far as to justify His disciples plucking and eating from ears of corn on the Sabbath.¹² He openly condemned scribes, Pharisees, and lawyers, at times referring to them in pejorative terms. In essence, Christ resisted a significant portion of the religious order of His day. It does not appear that non-resistance was His absolute ethic, at least throughout the entirety of His life.

One of the above quotations from Niebuhr contains several scriptural injunctions which Niebuhr takes to be "absolute and uncompromising." Indeed, they are intended to be uncompromising standards, but I would call into question Niebuhr's insistence that they are absolute. The question is not as to how they function as ideals, it is to determine what they are as precisely as possible. Before addressing this further, it would be profitable to expand upon the notion and the function of ideals in Niebuhr's thought.

He repeatedly speaks of two distinct realms: realism and idealism. Realism is the state of affairs as they actually exist in the world. It is a state governed by sin and self-interest and cannot be completely escaped in this life. Idealism describes the existence that Christ eternally possesses and that which He modeled for us during His time on earth. Since we can never be free of the realistic realm, we can never fully attain the idealistic realm, at least as sinful creatures on earth. The best that can be hoped for is that the two be kept in tension.¹³

Thus the real problem of a Christian social ethic is to derive from the Gospel a clear view of the realities with which we must deal in our common or social life, and also to preserve a sense of responsibility for achieving the highest measure of order, freedom and justice despite the hazards of man's collective life. Once again, the necessary realism can be held together only in terms of a Christian faith which refuses to make sin and self-interest normative, but which also understands that human history offers no simple way out to the kingdom of pure love and complete

¹²Mt. 12:1 ff.

¹³Ibid., "Idealism, Realism, and Christian Responsibility," *RN*, pp. 126 ff.

disinterestedness. Nothing is quite so difficult yet so genuinely Christian, as to remember that in all political struggles there are no saints but only sinners fighting each other, and to remember at the same time that history from man's, rather than God's, perspective is constituted of significant distinctions between types and degrees of sin. It is well to know that God judges all men and that in his sight no man living is justified. But we are men and not God. We must make historic choices.¹⁴

Niebuhr draws from St. Augustine in distinguishing the real from the ideal. The *civitas terrena*, guided by love of self, and the *civitas dei*, guided by the love of God, are "commingled" not so much in a cosmic sense, but within human nature itself. Herein lies the tension between the two. Egoism is natural in the sense that it is universal, yet it is not natural in that it does not conform to the transcendent element of human nature that has God as its end.¹⁵ Machiavelli correctly defines the realist as one who purposes "to follow the truth of the matter rather than the imagination of it." In contrast, the idealist is "the person who seeks to bring self-interest under the discipline of a more universal law and in harmony with a more universal good."¹⁶ Niebuhr believes that the "Biblical account of human behavior, upon which Augustine bases his thought, can escape both the illusions of a too consistent idealism and the cynicism of a too consistent realism . . ."¹⁷

The danger rests in the possibility of the tension being lost, in which case they would each detrimentally degenerate, idealism into "sentimentality" and realism into "self-defeat."¹⁸ Each pole must be maintained in its fullest form in order for the tension to remain intact. Consequently, the notion of ideal must be held as something just beyond apprehensibility, and Niebuhr is thus committed to understanding the scriptural injunctions in that regard, otherwise, they would be of little use. I contend that the ideal does not need to be altogether unattainable in order for the tension to exist, it is only necessary that the ideal be unattainable to a degree. Niebuhr would likely agree.

¹⁴Ibid., pp. 129 f.

¹⁵Ibid., "The Relevance of Christian Realism," *RN*, pp. 120 ff.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 124.

¹⁸Ibid., pp. 124 f.

Nevertheless, I cannot accept the notion that the scriptural injunctions are placed before us as dangling, hypothetical carrots. Christ knows our limitations and the other constraints that apply to the human situation. He thus gives us ideals that are to be understood in a normative, not in an absolute, sense. We can attain them normatively while continuing to pursue them absolutely.

For instance, the injunction to "resist not evil" must be weighed against the demands of justice. "Love your enemies" is qualified by the conflicting obligations we have to family and friends. "If ye love them that love you what thanks have you?" does not imply that love cannot be altruistic, only that it must be so. The command to "be not anxious for your life" does not ignore the instinctive desire for well-being. "Be ye therefore perfect as your father in heaven is perfect," cannot possibly mean that we achieve the infinite perfections of God, it must surely mean that we achieve them to a relative degree. Finally, in order to love my neighbor as myself, a certain degree of self-love must exist. The Golden Rule also presupposes the notion of self-interest. Matthew 5, believed to describe the ethic of complete non-resistance, relates more to forgiveness and non-retaliation than it does to entire non-resistance. Obviously, the interpretations of these scriptures can be debated in great detail, but I will concede such and move on to other issues.

Additional Constraints on Non-resistance

Niebuhr permits other considerations to enter the dialog, obviously with conclusions different from mine, however, they do bear upon the discussion. First, an ethic of non-resistance must account for obligations to others. This holds true especially for those whom we generally consider ourselves to have a greater duty, such as family, friends, and business associates.

It may do for a Francis of Assisi to trust his fellow men and assume that even a bandit will finally do him no wrong: but it would be foolish for a

village banker who holds a mortgage on most of the homes in the village to make a sudden venture in trust and decide to have his vaults open. He may have a legal and even a moral right to collect interest on his mortgages, yet it is not an insistence on rights, but a sacrifice of rights for the sake of fellowship, which finally creates that type of relationship in which there is security without recourse to force.¹⁹

Keeping our obligations to others requires health, safety, and well-being. These can be jeopardized in utter non-resistance.

Second, each of us has obligations to justice, which cannot be attained without balancing the "claims of the self (whether individual or collective)" against the "claims of the other."²⁰ In fact, both sets of claims must be taken into account. This cannot be achieved in entire non-resistance which seeks a "disinterestedness." The third point, related somewhat to the second, is that non-resistance is impractical in a sinful world. In his critique of pacifism, Niebuhr observes that non-resistance seeks justice solely through an appeal to the conscience of the aggressor, granting that such an appeal is in most cases insufficient.²¹ Some type of force or coercion is needed to stop the aggression; pride and power must be resisted.²² Niebuhr describes the "two poles of his thought" on the matter: "One is that the use of physical violence in international life has impressed itself upon his [Niebuhr's] mind as an unmitigated and unjustified evil. The other is that some form of social compulsion seems necessary and justified on occasion in all but the most ideal human societies."²³

Niebuhr sees himself in a dilemma, forced to choose between the lesser of two evils, albeit the dilemma is one of Niebuhr's own making, simply because he will not allow any legitimate role of self-interest, even to the benefit of others. The dilemma in this case reduces to what I consider to be a faulty presupposition. In any event, the ethic

¹⁹Ibid., "A Critique of Pacifism," *L&J*, p. 243.

²⁰Ibid., "The Ethic . . .," p. 28.

²¹Ibid., p. 250.

²²Ibid., "Pacifism," *RN*, p. 241.

²³Ibid., "Pacifism and the Use of Force," *L&J*, p. 248.

of entire non-resistance has been called into serious question and if I have been successful, it should be apparent that an alternative is needed.

Toward a Practical Ideal

Thus far, the only objection to Niebuhr's schema is his insistence on entire non-resistance as an absolute ethic. I have proposed that the tension between realism and idealism can be maintained even if the absolute ethic is replaced with one that is: 1) at least partially within human grasp and 2) not insistent that self-interest must be excluded. I believe that not only can such an ethic be articulated, but that it is demonstrated time and time again in the lives of everyday people. I will make reference to one such example.

Dietrich von Hildebrand was born in Florence in 1889, being the son of a German sculptor. Developing a love for philosophy, he studied under the likes of Edmund Husserl, Max Scheler, and Adolf Reinach. He converted to Catholicism in 1914 and taught philosophy for many years at the University of Munich. After World War I, Nazism began to spread in southern Germany. Discerning its intrinsic evil, von Hildebrand began denouncing Nazism in articles and speeches throughout Germany and Europe.

When Hitler solidified himself as Germany's leader, von Hildebrand declared himself unwilling to remain under such tyranny and left Germany for Austria, where he began teaching philosophy at the University of Vienna. Now determined more than ever to oppose the Nazis, he established and promoted the anti-Nazi newspaper *Christliche Standestaat*. Himmler and Hitler were determined to silence von Hildebrand, and they gave orders to kill him. His friend and patron, Austrian Premier Engelbert Dollfuss, was murdered by the Nazis, but von Hildebrand escaped the hit-squads and fled Austria just before it fell to the Nazis.

He was pursued through many countries, finally arriving in America in 1940 by way of France, Switzerland, Portugal, and Brazil. During this period of his life, amidst the turmoil and persecution, he produced perhaps the greatest work of his life, *Transformation in Christ*. Now penniless in New York, he was hired as professor of philosophy at Fordham University, where he taught until retirement. He died in 1977 in New Rochelle, New York.²⁴

Dietrich von Hildebrand is a sterling example of the balance between non-resistance and resistance. Throughout the Nazi ordeal, he never compromised his principles as many others had done in hopes of avoiding conflict. He believed that conflict was in certain instances not only a necessity, as Niebuhr would most likely confess, but he saw it as the right thing to do, not seeing himself in some sort of dilemmatic quandary. Nevertheless, von Hildebrand never resorted to violent means in dealing with his enemies. He sought ways to unseat the Nazis from power, hoping that it could be done before more aggressive strategies would need to be implemented. The threat of death was not one that he was willing just readily to accept, for other considerations entered into the decision to flee for his life.

What is even more amazing is the book that he produced during that time. *Transformation in Christ* is a spiritual classic, focusing on how we can be transformed in our innermost selves, possessing an ever-willingness to change, pursuing and exemplifying the inward virtues of Christ's character. Without the biographical note which I summarized above, a newcomer to von Hildebrand would be hard pressed to ever suspect the type of conflict that von Hildebrand endured. Although his outward actions were directed against the Nazis and their efforts, his inner spirit exuded a tranquillity and forgiveness that can only be appreciated and experienced through reading the book itself.

I would like to leave von Hildebrand for a brief moment and return to Niebuhr a final time. The difficulty in working with theologians such as Niebuhr, who thrive on

²⁴von Hildebrand, Dietrich, *Transformation in Christ* (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press), pp. 501 ff.

paradox and dilemma, is that many issues are left without a note of finality, but are left in tension. That is the way they see the world. However, the corresponding advantage lies within the paradox or dilemma itself, for in presenting an issue as a paradox, Niebuhr examines every possible angle before favoring one option over the other. This often provides the analyst with a viable alternative from the outset.

In the case of non-resistance, Niebuhr does in fact suggest what he calls "non-violent resistance" as another option, but one that has no scriptural sanction.²⁵ This can take the form of non-combative opposition or avoidance of conflict, but is best described as non-cooperation. Civil disobedience, boycotts, and strikes are all examples of non-violent resistance. Niebuhr blames Mohandas Gandhi for blurring the distinction between non-resistance and non-violent resistance. Gandhi wants to categorize violent resistance as a physical activity and non-violent resistance as a spiritual one. In this way, he equates non-violent resistance with non-resistance. Inversely, Niebuhr feels that non-violent resistance is in fact more closely related to violent resistance, seeing that even though the two approaches utilize different means, they still achieve similar ends and are both coercive. Moreover, he takes non-violent resistance as a physical activity, since it affects its target physically.²⁶

The problem with this ratiocination is that it assumes that one is obligated to cooperate with evil-doers. Even at the international level, where actions of resistance against a cruel regime affect innocent citizens, Niebuhr would absolve the regime of bearing full responsibility for the decisions it makes in behalf of its citizens, transferring the blame to those who resist the regime. Evidently, responding to evil is considered in and of itself an evil. In matters of justice, we do not take actions against individuals merely because we consider them to be altogether depraved, but having considered all elements of the situation, both the favorable and the unfavorable, we consider the act of

²⁵Niebuhr, "Pacifism," *RN*, pp. 241 f.

²⁶*Ibid.*, "The Preservation of Moral Values in Politics," pp. 58 ff.

opposition to be the most appropriate response, not necessarily the ideal one. Similarly, matters of justice between nations cannot be decided by the fact that each nation contains innocent people, else tyranny would never be opposed. Each government makes decisions in behalf of its citizens and is hence responsible for the results of said decisions, including those which are incurred as a response from another government. Niebuhr wants to assume responsibility for every innocent person in the world, but unless the tyrannical powers are properly handled, what may help some innocent people in the short term may in fact harm many more over time.

Niebuhr asserts the impossibility of freedom from anxiety or of loving our neighbors as ourselves.²⁷ It seems that a less-than-ideal world would require a less-than-ideal ethic in the sense that it takes into consideration the limit of available options and seeks the best one. In the best of all worlds, opposition and coercion would never be necessary, but we do not enjoy such an existence. Often, justice demands that evil be opposed, yes, even at times vanquished. Dietrich von Hildebrand concludes that "it may be our duty to take up the challenge . . . In such cases we must oppose the encroachment, and therefore cannot shape our conduct with a view to avoiding a conflict at any cost. For our freedom is not ours to give away; it has been entrusted to us by God as an essential instrument for us to do His will."²⁸

At times the most loving thing is not the easiest nor is it that which brings the most immediate results. There are no simple rules to tell us when to fight, when to resist, when to flee, and when to submit. We would like to express each and every conflict in concrete, deontological terms so that the proper choice would always be self-evident, but all too often the choice must be made, to a great extent, on the basis of utility. Yet, our consideration of the matter is not quite complete, for even though an ethic which dictates particular actions in given situations does not emerge, a frame of mind can be fostered,

²⁷Ibid., "Pacifism," pp. 242 ff.

²⁸von Hildebrand, p. 345.

one that will attempt to respond to every situation in a manner that is consistent with the character of Christ.

Once again, I find von Hildebrand to provide some pertinent insights. First, we must not react mainly from self-interest. "We must carefully keep one thing apart from the other, and never for a moment stick the pretentious label of a *fight for the kingdom of God* on what is really an action meant to subserve our own welfare. In no wise must our pure, selfless, serene zeal for the kingdom of God be contaminated with the base coin of self-assertion."²⁹ Every effort should be made to gain as objective and unbiased a view as possible, being careful not to revert to "the natural automatism of our defensive reactions."³⁰

Second, the cause can never be taken up as our own. If we can respond as we honestly believe Christ would respond, then our response becomes one to Him and not to the situation in and of itself. The response of Christ always seeks to highest good for all parties and does not entangle the outcome with self-esteem.³¹ Ephesians 6:12 reminds us that our battle is with the forces of evil in general, not with people. We are players in a much larger game. Everything we do is to be considered a service to the Lord Himself, according to Colossians 3:23. Self-interest has a function, but never a dominant one.

Third, there is a need to maintain inward peace in the midst of conflict. This comes through a connection with the heart of God, responding as He would be perceived to respond. This upward movement of peace makes possible the inner peace which, in turn, enables an outward peace with others. Even in conflict, the attitude is one of charity toward all. The act of opposition is one that should be unpalatable and is only performed out of necessity.³²

²⁹Ibid., p. 351.

³⁰Ibid., pp. 343 f.

³¹Ibid., p. 352.

³²Ibid., pp. 348 f.

Fourth, "suffering can be transfigured by patience and resignation to God's will." This is not sanctioning suffering or injustice, and this type of resignation "does not dissolve suffering, but it transfigures suffering and removes from it that sting which threatens to destroy our inward peace."³³ In the garden of Gethsemane, Christ finds the strength to face His immanent suffering through submission to the Father's will. Suffering has a redemptive nature, even if only in cultivating a spirit of meekness.

He who possesses [meekness] will always, even though he be attacked or injured, preserve that radiance of loving kindness: that soft bloom of a sublime spirituality entirely ordained to the intention of charity. It is as though he never accepted a provocation. Even though faced with an enemy, he does not exchange the garment of love, the unarmed innocence of loving kindness, for a coat-of-mail which would harden him and protect him against the arrows of his assailant. Instead he tenders his vulnerable heart, unshielded, to the impact of those arrows, without steeling his heart against them. He endures the wounds inflicted upon him. No attack will impel him to abandon that specific openness of the soul which is a chief characteristic of love.³⁴

I will allow Niebuhr the final point. Above all, we must live by the law of love. This law remains within each of us so that we are not blinded by self-love.³⁵ Our actions do not have to be dominated by self-interest; we can act out of love in every situation. At times love and justice appear to be mutually exclusive, but such is not the case. The just act is the loving act. This can even be seen in the highest act of love: forgiveness. It is considered the highest act of love because it has the highest price: the cross. At the surface, forgiveness appears to be a suspension of justice, but the opposite is true. God's forgiveness offered to humanity is demonstrated through the justice vicariously carried out on the cross. Our forgiveness of others is a response to both God's love and justice. Because God loves us, we can love one another, and because God forgives us, it is only

³³Ibid., pp. 382 ff.

³⁴Ibid., p. 407.

³⁵Niebuhr, "Christian Faith and Natural Law," p. 53.

just that we forgive one another. Those who would forgive others must see themselves as sinners in need of God's forgiveness.³⁶

Conclusion

Niebuhr is correct in asserting that an ethic must be aimed at some type of ideal, and for the Christian, the most obvious choice is Christ himself. Conversely, an ethic must also be rooted in present reality, and expectations must likewise be guided in this respect. Here is where Niebuhr refuses to tread. He will not allow reality to enter into the consideration of what we should expect in a Christian ethic. Rather, he places humanity entirely within the real and expectations for humanity within the ideal. Granted, he expects the real in human behavior yet he sees it as unacceptable. This is his self-made dilemma. The truly ethical action cannot be taken; self-interest sees to that. We chase the elusive ideal, struggling all the while, yet it is the struggle that elevates us and keeps us from reverting to our worst. Love and justice are achievable to a point, but the emphasis is placed on their inability to be fully realized.

I have proposed that self-interest has a limited role in ethics. In order to avoid Niebuhr's "dilemma," one would either need to grant such or assert the humans are able to act entirely from altruistic motives. I believe that the first choice is more realistic, more demonstrable, and more consistent with Christian scripture. Once this move is made, it is no longer necessary to embrace entire non-resistance as the ideal. Using Niebuhr's own categories, I have briefly outlined non-violent resistance as a viable alternative, the one I consider to be the superior of the two. Finally, I suggested that although a set of axiological principles will not always necessitate a certain response in a given situation, certain inward principles of character can guide the choice to be an action flowing from the law of love. That is not only the true Christian ideal, it is the one to which Niebuhr most heartily aspires.

³⁶Ibid., "Christians Fooling Themselves," p. 44.

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