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# Conquering Megalomania and Despair: a Niebuhrian Response to the Politico-Economic Impasse

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## Abstract

The works of Reinhold Niebuhr contain invaluable examples of how Christian resources can be fruitfully exploited to address urgent economic and political issues. The ideas of sin and continuous redemption, which arguably belong to the core of the Christian faith, are creatively translated by Niebuhr, so that they can be included in public debates and interdisciplinary dialogues. In this article, his conception of sin as the perversion of the will-to-live into the will-to-power is endorsed. Its counterforce, it is argued, is human love infused with divine love. Love is, therefore, not a simple possibility, which can be applied to our economic and political problems. Instead, it is the impossible possibility, the ultimate and critical perspective from which prevailing forms of justice and philanthropy are judged. Through the public theology of Niebuhr, the ideal of love becomes a universally valid alternative to the rationalist and naturalist approaches to human morality.

## Keywords

freedom – humility – justice – love – political economy – responsibility – sin

Neither economic thought nor ‘the economy’ is independent of the larger cultural context of which it is part. The idea of an ‘economic man’ who is supposedly detached from all moral commitments (‘value’) and of a universe that is a quarry to be exploited arises in the naturalistic materialist moral framework, which is still ours in the West today. So do economic theories that propagate

the image of a market governed by laws that are analogous to the laws of nature. 'A naturalistic materialism', Charles Taylor observes, 'is not only on offer, but presents itself as the only view compatible with the most prestigious institution of the modern world, viz., science'.<sup>1</sup> It determines our culture and its institutions, and therefore also economic thought and the organization of the economy. Through policies, modern naturalism has sanctioned laissez-faireism and the oppression of weaker players in the free market.<sup>2</sup> More insidiously, it has levelled out both the depths of evil and the heights of the good. Public theology, it is here argued, has the responsibility of opposing this levelling out of good and evil. It will be a liberating force if it is able to unmask the faces of evil and articulate the possibilities for justice in the politico-economic context. From a public theological perspective, injustice is not simply the result of ordinary human selfishness, as Reinhold Niebuhr has insightfully and masterfully demonstrated in his various works. Economic theories and models certainly presume individualism and human selfishness—expressed in concepts such as utility and profit maximalization, both at the individual and collective (national or corporate) levels.<sup>3</sup> Yet, they fail to reckon with 'the demonic force in human life'.<sup>4</sup>

This mystery of evil is captured by the controversial Christian concept of 'original sin'. Niebuhr's thought has public relevance precisely because he has been able to transcend such theological controversies. His conception of sin as the perversion of the will-to-live into the will-to-power is much more insightful and profound.<sup>5</sup> Such corruption is the side-effect of the human freedom that is inherent to the spiritual nature of the human. This non-historical approach to original sin is one of the many purifications of religion that Niebuhr undertakes—very much in line with the prophetic tradition. It also constitutes a translation into a common language that is addressed to all persons, religious

1 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 28.

2 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Social Structures of the Economy*. Translated by Chris Turner (Cambridge/Malden, MA: Polity, 2008), pp. 199, 208.

3 The following observation of Adam Smith is often cited: 'It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages'. Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), p. 27.

4 Reinhold Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (New York: Meridian Books, 1956), p. 24.

5 Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p. 110. For an illuminating account of this perversion, see Alfred Adler & Walter Béran Wolfe, 'The Feeling of Inferiority and the Striving for Recognition', *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, 20:12 (1927), 1881–1886.

or not. The articulation of the depths of evil and of its many manifestations is one of the tasks of a public theology informed by prophetic Christianity. It should also be able to voice the hope of redemption and formulate the ways in which such redemption can be realized. It also has the duty, therefore, of recalling the heights of the good and the ways in which divine transcendence constantly sustains immanence. In this regard as well, Niebuhr transcends the boundaries of theological discussions about grace and justification, and instead insists that the Kingdom of God is possible in history, while at the same time transcending the historically possible.<sup>6</sup> Redemption is possible because the overabundant divine love is available to all those struggling for justice.

### 1 The Relevance of Niebuhr for Public Theology Today

Niebuhr is an exemplary figure of a public theologian who effectively engages with economic and political questions. His writings have appealed to both Christians and secular intellectuals and politicians.<sup>7</sup> His social engagement, pastoral commitment, intellectual integrity, and loyalty to the prophetic version of Christianity have contributed to making him a credible public intellectual. Barack Obama is reported to have voiced his indebtedness to Niebuhr for his non-cynical, Christian realism.<sup>8</sup> The latter constitutes a strong criticism of national triumphalism or self-righteousness. Though caution and some dose of scepticism are desirable when it comes to claims of politicians being ‘inspired’ by intellectuals, Niebuhr’s relevance for contemporary social and political issues has been emphasized by various scholars.<sup>9</sup> Robin W. Lovin rightly remarks

6 Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, 36.

7 Duncan B. Forrester, ‘The Scope of Public Theology’, *Studies in Christian Ethics*, 17:2 (2004), 5–19; at 10.

8 The Obama-Niebuhr connection has been well documented. See, for example, Liam Julian, ‘Niebuhr and Obama’, *Policy Review*, 154 (2009), 30–31; Richard Harries and Stephen Platten (ed.), *Reinhold Niebuhr and Contemporary Politics: God and Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Ward R. Holder and Peter B. Josephson, *The Irony of Barack Obama: Barack Obama, Reinhold Niebuhr and the Problem of Christian Statecraft* (London & New York: Routledge, 2016).

9 Charles C. Lemert, *Why Niebuhr Matters* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2011), xi; Jackson Lears, ‘American Oracle: The Uses & Abuses of Reinhold Niebuhr’, *Commonweal*, 138:18 (2011), 12; Robin W. Lovin, ‘Reinhold Niebuhr: Impact and Implications’, *Political Theology*, 6:4 (2005), 459–471; Daniel A. Morris, ‘“The Pull of Love”: Mutual Love as Democratic Virtue in Niebuhrian Political Theology’, *Political Theology*, 17:1 (2016), 73–90. See also the collection of essays edited by Harries and Platten, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Contemporary Politics*. For an analysis of the possible reasons for Niebuhr’s prominence as public intellectual, see

that 'Niebuhr transcended his own time and changed his contemporaries' way of understanding themselves'.<sup>10</sup> He has also been criticized, however, especially by feminists, for his condemnation of self-love and his conception of self-sacrificial love as the highest ideal of love.<sup>11</sup> Though it is true that he sometimes does equate sin with self-love (in line with Augustine), he also has a more accurate understanding of sin running throughout his works. It is his conception of sin as the corruption of the will to live into the will to power that I will be endorsing here, while maintaining a philosophical agnosticism with respect to the orthodox Christian doctrine of original sin.<sup>12</sup>

When Niebuhr refers to sin as the 'false eternal and the false universal', or 'as the corruption of man's freedom', he is not simply alluding to self-love.<sup>13</sup> Sin, conceived this way, is certainly 'universally applicable', also to selfless persons because it is an intrinsic part of human existence.<sup>14</sup> Experience shows that selflessness can be mixed with other motives. However problematic the Christian concept 'sin' might be, it is still a more prudent idea that exhorts to vigilance and responsibility, thereby contesting discourses that presume some sort of human 'innocence'.<sup>15</sup> Niebuhr's conceptualization of sin is credible and defensible from a secular perspective, that is, without adhering to the Christian faith. Such plausibility is a precondition for public theology. 'Self-love' is an ambiguous concept and can be conceived as a consequence of sin (that is to say, the corruption of the will here and now, and not an inherited 'original' sin) if it is used to mean 'egoism'. The latter involves comparison and an active negation of others. It comes closest to Rousseau's concept of *amour-propre* (which he contrasts to *l'amour de soi*, the innocent love of the self that involves no comparison). Max Scheler's distinction between self-love and egoism here is illuminating:

Nor is "egoism" the same as "self-love". For in "egoism" the given object of love is not my individual self, released from all social ties [...] Its object is

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- Graeme Smith, 'Taking Sides: An Investigation into Reinhold Niebuhr's Rise to the Position of Public Intellectual', *International Journal of Public Theology*, 8:2 (2014), 131–157.
- 10 Lovin, 'Reinhold Niebuhr: Impact and Implications', 460.
- 11 See Barbara Hilkert Andolsen, 'Agape in Feminist Ethics', *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, 9:1 (1981), 69–83; Morris, 'The Pull of Love', 73.
- 12 Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p. 110.
- 13 Reinhold Niebuhr, *Christianity and Power Politics* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1969), p. 63; *Faith and Politics: A Commentary on Religious, Social and Political Thought in a Technological Age*, ed. Ronald H. Stone (New York: George Braziller, 1968), p. 9.
- 14 Contrarily to what Morris claims in 'The Pull of Love', 73, 74.
- 15 Paul Valadier, *Détresse de Politique, Force du Religieux* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2007), p. 100.

simply myself, as one in competition with others, who thereupon simply “fails to observe” that others have any value. It is typical of egoism that it implies a *glance at other people* and their values and goods, and consists in just this “*failure to observe*” the claims engendered by these values.<sup>16</sup>

Niebuhr could have prevented much misunderstanding and unnecessary criticism (from feminists especially) if he had made that distinction or further qualified his concepts. The way he uses self-love would suggest that he means egoism. These two terms are therefore used interchangeably in his works.

If critics defend self-love conceived as self-respect or a sense of dignity, they will find in Niebuhr an ally. Indeed, he does not condemn self-respect. On the contrary it is lack of self-respect that leads to the desire to impress others and hence to the will to power. Niebuhr thus helps us to understand why modern civilization has been unable to give up the growth (including ‘green’ growth) paradigm.<sup>17</sup> The obsession with bigness and power reflects our failure to come to terms with our universe, to transcend and heal our own inner brokenness and the brokenness between us and our fellow beings. Niebuhr notes:

Vast metropolitan conglomerates of ours [...] are monstrosities from an economic standpoint. They are built for psychological reasons. The same may be said for our worship of power and bigness in the nation. Lacking moral self-respect we try to impress ourselves, and the universe perhaps, by power. The splendour of the New York skyline and the venality of the political life of our city put in juxtaposition are a perfect symbol of the spiritual state of modern man. Clearly the spiritual leadership which our generations needs must come from prophets who know how to insist that man cannot be whole until he lives again in organic unity with his fellow men.<sup>18</sup>

The fascination with technology and its unbridled development manifest both megalomania and despair in our relationship to our world.

This conceived connection between the feeling of insecurity and the will to power corresponds with the individual psychology of Alfred Adler, who is

16 Max Scheler, *On Feeling, Knowing, and Valuing: Selected Writings*, edited by Harold J. Bershady (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 73.

17 For an account of why the green growth discourse is a masquerade, see, Laura Stegemann and Marinus Ossewaarde, ‘A Sustainable Myth: A Neo-Gramscian Perspective on the Populist and Post-Truth Tendencies of the European Green Growth Discourse’, *Energy Research & Social Science*, 43 (2018): 25–32.

18 Niebuhr, *Faith and Politics*, p. 71.

a generation before Niebuhr. According to Adler, the striving for recognition (power) is the soul's attempt to 'neutralize the torturing feeling of inferiority'.<sup>19</sup> Both the feeling of inferiority and the striving for recognition can partly be blamed on an education (in the broad sense of the term) that implants ideas of grandeur in our minds and hearts, or fails to develop our 'social feeling' that counters the striving for personal power.<sup>20</sup> These ideas are themselves the fruits of a 'culture [that] is permeated with similar grandiose delusions'.<sup>21</sup> Correspondingly, an environment in which the human feels himself 'the equal of every other human being' is conspicuously absent.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, these grandiose delusions can be prevented, as Niebuhr similarly reminds us, if we find existential security in our immediate environments. A healthy will-to-live is dependent on the 'confidence in the meaningfulness of its world'.<sup>23</sup>

This confidence in the meaningfulness of life is not something which results from a sophisticated analysis of the forces and factors which surround the human enterprise. It is something which is assumed in every healthy life. It is primary religion. Men may be quite unable to define the meaning of life, and yet live it by a simple trust that is meaning. This primary religion is the basic optimism of all vital and wholesome human life.<sup>24</sup>

It is this basic trust in life that has been destroyed in contemporary times. This loss of faith in the meaningfulness of life and of our human enterprises lies at the basis of a civilizational crisis that is not confined to the West only. A corrupted political economy, which is more global than local, is one of the aspects of this crisis. Niebuhr understood this situation so well, and, as a consequence, he tirelessly emphasized the need to regain some sort of unity between us and our world, and our fellow beings. This important insight of his should be highlighted because, at first sight, it does not seem to pertain to political-economic matters. The failure to reckon with the cultural dimension of our political-economic reality is the price of disciplinary specialization, but even more fundamentally, reflects the academic and political sanctioning of the image of a

19 Alfred Adler and Walter Béran Wolfe, 'The Feeling of Inferiority and the Striving for Recognition', *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, 20:12 (1927): 1881–1886, 28 (within the article).

20 Alfred Adler, *Understanding Human Nature* (New York: Greenberg Publisher, 1946), p. 73.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 65.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 77.

23 Niebuhr, *Christianity and Power Politics*, p. 178.

24 *Ibid.*

disembedded economy. A disembedded economy is one that is divorced from the polity or a people. More often than not, such disembedding is preceded by the dissolution of the polity and hence the prioritization of economic matters above the common good. As a result, the economy is left to the market, that is, to private forces. Niebuhr therefore rightly emphasizes the need to regain a sense of fellowship and of a common good. The denial of such fellowship is an important manifestation of sin.

Niebuhr's conception of sin avoids some of the objections to the traditional Christian doctrine of sin. It helps us correct the uncritical rationalism of modern naturalism, which is the metaphysics that informs modern economic thought and practice.<sup>25</sup> 'Self-interest' might sound harmless, but the reality that it refers to is not so innocent. How can we be oblivious to the 'demonic force in human life, of the peril in which all achievements of life and civilization constantly stand because the evil impulses in men may be compounded in collective actions until they reach diabolical proportions'?<sup>26</sup> The aftermath of the neutralization of vices—which we owe to Mandeville and Hume, among others—is an astounding naivety in economic thinking.<sup>27</sup> Such naivety is reflected in the widespread belief that money-making and commerce in general would distract humans from 'cruelty, the reckless pursuit of personal power and authority, and other forms of self-aggrandizement'.<sup>28</sup> Economic theories and models certainly presume individualism and human selfishness (or, more precisely and neutrally, 'self-interest') both at the individual and collective (national or corporate) levels. Given the naturalistic materialist framework within which they operate, however, they fail to reckon with the depths of the human heart, or to use Pascal's terminology, fail to capture human grandeur and misery. Evil loses its depth and mysterious nature.<sup>29</sup> It is quite understandable that our predecessors got tired of the moralism of the Christianity that prevailed then, and of original sin as the universal explanans of all our sorrows. It is nonetheless remarkable that economic theorists were (are) willing and able to abstract from human reality, while uncritically absorbing the reigning social Darwinism. As a result, economics has been made to serve the interests of the established elite.

The emphasis on sin or evil would paralyze human thought and actions if it were not accompanied by the good news that divine love is readily available

25 Niebuhr, *Faith and Politics*, p. 29.

26 Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p. 24.

27 Skidelsky and Skidelsky, *How Much is Enough?*, p. 49; Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 229.

28 Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment*, p. 333.

29 Alfred Weber, *Farewell to European History: Or, The Conquest of Nihilism*. (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1947), p. 47.



to all those struggling to become whole and to establish some sort of unity, however fragile, among fellow beings. Divine love fuses with human love so that humans are, from time to time, capable of an unprudential, unconditional and unreciprocal love. The perception of sacrificial love as the highest ideal of love has attracted feminist criticism, which is partly justified against the background of the Christian abuse of power. The problem with agapeic love as sacrificial love is that such conception of the love of neighbour has been, and is still, misused to sustain unequal relationships. It has informed a culture of submission and self-effacement among some members of humankind (women, among others). In highlighting the mutuality of Christian love, the equality of persons—of dignities—is therefore stressed.

In defence of Niebuhr's concept of agape, especially in the context of our secular social/political-economic reality, three reasons in favour can be adduced. Firstly, we run the risk of obliterating the transforming presence of transcendence (divine love) in our immanent/secular reality if we 'reduce' the highest form of love to mutual forms of love. In a way, the highest ideal of love is present in all forms of human love, since the latter are symbols of divine love. Secondly, the idea of love as sacrificial love will prove to be useful and necessary if we want to repair the consequences of a civilization informed by the lust for power and prestige. Mutuality presumes equality, which is precisely absent in our world. Related to this, the emphasis on mutuality or reciprocity in economic relations fails to reckon with past injustices, unequal conditions and the asymmetry of structural power.

## 2 The Commandment to Transcend our Brokenness

Niebuhr's reading of the ideal of love comprises features that make it conceptually sound and translatable to the secular context. It avoids both a sentimentalism that masks the cruelty of international politico-economic systems and the instrumentalization of (agapeic) love. Love is not the solution to our political-economic problems. It is not an instrument that we have at our disposal and that we can use to correct the structural flaws that have resulted in unhealthy concentrations of wealth and, accordingly, to irresponsible power in the hands of the few. There is permanent tension between the radicalism and unprudential nature of agapeic love (and the sacrifices that it demands), on the one hand, and the realm of competition, calculations and strategies, compromises, and coercion, on the other. Niebuhr's interpretation of the ideal of love in relation to our world therefore contains a warning against utopianism. At the same time, it also releases our highest possibilities from

the naturalist corset. We can transcend our egoism because we can rely on an extra-human source of empowerment, and the latter is not confined to the select few. Related to this, the commandment of love exhorts us to transcend our inner and interpersonal divisions. It therefore addresses our need and desire to be whole. According to Niebuhr's 'holistic' perspective, natural passions and reason should be affirmed as good, while never equated to the self. On the contrary, our reason and passions are the instruments of the self and hence of its commitments or goals. The latter are traditionally religious 'because they spring from either primary or inherited conceptions of the meaning of life and the goal of existence'.<sup>30</sup> The 'emancipation' from great traditions has therefore resulted in rootless individuals whose passions and reason are no longer ordered. This uprootedness is the breeding ground for the will to power.

Niebuhr's emphasis on the will and the desired (and necessary) unity of the self should here be noted. He dissociates love as the highest ideal from other images of love (as a fleeting emotion) or an ascetic (Platonic) ideal. For Niebuhr the ideal of love is 'first of all a commandment which appeals to the will'.<sup>31</sup> So, then, what is that 'will' to which the commandment is addressed? Niebuhr explains:

It is neither the total personality nor yet the rational element in personality. It is the total organized personality moving against the recalcitrant elements in the self. The will implies a cleavage in the self but not a cleavage primarily between reason and impulse. The will is a rational organization of impulse. Consequently, the Christian ideal of a loving will does not exclude the impulses and emotions in nature through which the self is organically related to other life.<sup>32</sup>

The commandment to love God and our neighbour with *all* our heart, soul, and mind demands from the self that it transcends its internal contradictions, and love with all its might. In fact, 'all moral demands are demands of unity', Niebuhr notes, since 'life must not be lived at cross-purposes. The self must establish an inner unity of impulses and desires and it must relate itself harmoniously to other selves and other unities'.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Contribution of Religion to Social Work* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1932), p. 38.

<sup>31</sup> Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p. 188.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 188–189.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

Natural sympathy, human love or *eros* is not to be too quickly dismissed as irrelevant to human morality (and hence to justice). Niebuhr points to the 'strong social and utilitarian value' that love and benevolence have.<sup>34</sup> Religious moral discipline draws on these natural impulses in its endeavour to extend the boundaries of loyalties: 'Religion encourages love and benevolence [...] by absolutizing the moral principle of life until it achieves the purity of absolute disinterestedness and by imparting transcendent worth to the life of others.'<sup>35</sup> Hence, while the religious ethic and romanticism do share the common appreciation of 'natural virtues'—that is to say, the good natural inclinations in human nature—the former also contains a criticism of these same impulses. Egoism, Niebuhr remarks, rarely manifests itself in pursuits that only concern the narrow individual self. Hence, a 'narrow family loyalty is a more potent source of injustice than pure individual egoism'.<sup>36</sup> The attachment to our immediate communities, such as our family, tribe, race, and nation, is natural. Yet, it is the root of great prejudices and injustices. 'All these forces of natural sympathy', Niebuhr points out, 'may become facades behind which the will-to-power operates'.<sup>37</sup> Naturalism does not possess any resources to unmask such corruption.

The religious ethic, therefore, does not simply encourage us to follow our natural inclinations, and to cultivate these. It also exhorts us to transcend ourselves, which includes loving our enemies and forgiving seventy-seven times (a number that is to be symbolically and not literally interpreted, of course). The radicalism that is involved in *agape* or *caritas* distinguishes it from the more 'ordinary or natural manifestations of love. *Agape*, Niebuhr points out, 'is something more than even the most refined form of sympathy, for it does not depend upon the likes and dislikes that men may have for each other. It is not determined by interest or passion'.<sup>38</sup> This dissociation of agapeic love from passion or emotion is even more evident in the case of the love and forgiveness of our enemies. It is for this reason why *agape* cannot be understood as mutuality, contrarily to what Barbara Hilkert Andolsen claims.<sup>39</sup> There is no mutuality involved in the forgiveness of enemies and in the love of strangers. The commandment to love does not demand from us to be emotionally attached to

34 Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1963), p. 265.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 71.

36 Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p. 107.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 116.

38 Reinhold Niebuhr, *Love and Justice: Selections from the Shorter Writings of Reinhold Niebuhr* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1957), pp. 219–220.

39 Hilkert Andolsen, 'Agape in Feminist Ethics', 79.

them. What it does demand is that we free ourselves from hatred, and instead desire the good of those who have harmed us.<sup>40</sup> It demands us to accept our responsibility for the stranger.

Differently from Nygren and Luther, Niebuhr does not conceive of an absolute contradiction between *agape* and natural human love such as *eros* and *philia*. The realm of grace and the realm of nature are not juxtaposed to, or even worse, opposed to, each other. Luther's and Nygren's dualism, ironically enough, renders *agape* quite irrelevant to the human situation: unrelated realms cannot influence each other.<sup>41</sup> According to Niebuhr,

[The] ideal of love has the same relation to the facts and necessities of human experience as the God of prophetic faith has to the world. It is drawn from, and relevant to, every moral experience. It is immanent in life as God is immanent in the world. It transcends the possibilities of human life in its final pinnacle as God transcends the world. It must, therefore, be confused neither with the ascetic ethic of world-denying religions nor with the prudential morality of naturalism, designed to guide good people to success and happiness in this world.<sup>42</sup>

Agapeic love, that is, human love infused with divine love, is a 'curious compound of willing through the strength of the sense of obligation and of willing not by the strength of our will but by the strength which enters the will through grace'.<sup>43</sup> Along this line, it is incorrect to accuse Niebuhr of claiming that 'mutually loving relationships can be sustained only by a religious *norm* of agape (or sacrificial love)'.<sup>44</sup> Instead, these relationships are sustained by human love infused with divine love, which is not a 'norm', but more like some kind of 'spiritual energy' (for lack of a better expression). This conceived marriage of human and divine loves means that Niebuhr's ethic of love cannot be fitted into a virtue-ethics framework, contrarily to what Daniel A. Morris holds.<sup>45</sup>

An obvious question that arises is whether it is not presumptuous to claim that a religious idea is relevant for the secular world. It is noteworthy that Niebuhr presents the ideal of love as universally valid, as valid for all human

40 Niebuhr, *Love and Justice*, p. 220.

41 Reinhold Niebuhr, *Christian Realism and Political Problems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1954), p. 154.

42 Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p. 43.

43 Niebuhr, *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, p. 145.

44 Hilbert Andolsen, 'Agape in Feminist Ethics', 71. My italics.

45 Morris, 'The Pull of Love', 77; Niebuhr, *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, p. 168.

life, and not simply for those who adhere to the religious ethics to which it belongs. Doesn't the proposition that the ideal of love, which belongs to a particular religious tradition, is of universal relevance constitute a contradiction? How can the ideal of love inform public debates and secular endeavours when it is so closely associated with particular religious traditions? Clearly, love, including self-sacrificial love, is not a Christian invention. Niebuhr notes that it is not a 'caprice of mythology'.<sup>46</sup> In other words, it is not held true because it is revealed by religion, in particular, Christianity. On the contrary, the cross 'symbolizes an ideal which establishes points of relevance with the deepest experiences and insights of human life'.<sup>47</sup> A passage in Augustine's *Retractations* is here useful and relevant, where he explains what he meant by his claim that the Christian religion is the 'most secure and certain' way to salvation. Augustine writes:

I did so with reference to the name only, not to the thing itself of which this is only the name. For what is now called the Christian religion existed even among the ancients and was not lacking from the beginning of the human race until "Christ came in the flesh".<sup>48</sup>

The same reasoning can be applied to the ideal of love, which is arguably the essence of historical Christianity, though not its prerogative. The ideal of love cannot be dismissed as too religiously particular to be of relevance to the non-initiated. It is not 'superimposed upon human history by scriptural, or any other, authority. Human existence, when profoundly analysed, yields the law of love as the final law of human freedom'.<sup>49</sup>

### 3 No Justice without Love

The alternative ontology of the human, in which our highest vocation and our most powerful motive is conceived as love (sustained by divine love) competes with the prevailing naturalistic materialist ontologies in which altruism and sympathy are motives among other motives, and often mechanically caused. Economics, psychology, political science, and international studies often rely

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46 Niebuhr, *Faith and Politics*, p. 30.

47 Ibid.

48 St Augustine, *The Retractations* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1968), p. 52.

49 Niebuhr, *Faith and Politics*, p. 145.

on these dominant philosophies for their (implicit) conception of the human. Policymakers and other public figures are, in turn, dependent on these sciences and their popularized versions. The argument here is that these visions of the human (of our highest vocation and possibilities) and of the world (of what constitutes it) have been providing us with a distorted self-understanding and have been preventing us from relating to our universe and to our fellow beings in a way that befits humankind. They have led us to the brink of an ecological disaster and saddled us with a deplorable political leadership. Only the ethic of love is strong enough to help us rethink prevailing civilizational goals, identify more strongly with the common good, and reinforce our solidarity. Justice is not an alternative to the ethic of love (rightly understood), but is instead its manifestation. Our sense of justice therefore grows as our love grows. Conversely, without love or a sense of fellowship, there can be no striving for justice and hence no willingness to acknowledge the needs and rights of the other. This prerequisite of love for justice is illustrated by Susan Strange's impressive and yet failed attempt to convince the American people—as the most powerful economic player—that a better world begins with them. Her reasoning also reveals the difference between the ethic of love and altruism.

In her *Casino Capitalism*, Strange observes that economic reform 'must start with a change of mind in Washington,' given the greater 'structural power' of the United States.<sup>50</sup> Structural power is the power to 'shape and mould the structures of production, knowledge, security and credit within which others have no choice but to live if they are to participate in the world market economy'.<sup>51</sup> In order to end the prevailing global casino capitalism, the 'political conviction' that reform is needed will be necessary as well as certain institutional changes.<sup>52</sup> Since Strange knows that it is hard for Americans to accept the responsibility for the economic ills of other countries, she points out that it is in their own interest that they act. Their own future is at stake. She emphasizes that she is not appealing to their altruism or sense of responsibility towards the rest of the world. She warns that the failure to act would entail great suffering for Americans themselves. At first sight, it seems that Strange is having recourse to a rigorous realism and not betting on the capacity of people to look, think and feel beyond their immediate interests. It is in the interest of all Americans, and certainly of the better-off Americans, that economically and socially vulnerable Americans (Strange refers to the young black unemployed and blue-collar workers) are protected from even more suffering. The failure

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50 Susan Strange, *Casino Capitalism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), pp. 62, 67, 170–1.

51 *Ibid.*, p. 67.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 175.

to do so would have both economic and social consequences in the long run. Strange's argument is rational and reasonable. Yet, it is highly unlikely that she convinced many. She is, unconsciously perhaps, presuming much more than self-interest. She expects the better-off Americans to feel a sense of fellowship with the dispossessed. In other words, even though she appeals to the self-interest of the powerful and the potentially powerful, she is presuming much more solidarity than can be expected from a divided nation.

The reader can critically retort that the ideal of love is even more certainly bound to fail in this context of division. Niebuhr would have agreed with this rejoinder in his earlier years. He witnessed the failure of the 'pure morality of disinterestedness' in addressing the racial issue in the United States. Black Americans' 'forgiveness and forbearance [...] did not soften the hearts of their oppressors'.<sup>53</sup> The (violent) demand for justice seems to be the only way out in a world in the grip of sin. 'The problem of politics and economics', Niebuhr therefore observes, 'is the problem of justice'.<sup>54</sup> Justice would seem to involve the reconciliation of conflicting interests through coercion and compromises. Political and economic institutions need to presume the tenacity of egoism and embody defence mechanisms against the latter. Such a fragile balance of power hardly seems to have anything to do with love. Competing interests and unhealthy concentrations of powers cannot be resolved by preaching the love of one another: 'no moral idealism can overcome a basic mechanical defect in the social structure'.<sup>55</sup>

Human groups are less trustworthy in their corporate actions than the individuals which compose them, and the religious approach to inter-group problems, particularly in the field of economics and politics, is therefore particularly subject to the corruption of sentimentality. Religious idealism finds tremendous difficulties in making itself effective in the economic and political life of our day.<sup>56</sup>

Love conceived as benevolence and sympathy is often overstretched when it is confronted with the 'larger and more complex problems' that plague inter-group life.<sup>57</sup>

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53 Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, p. 268. Niebuhr uses the term 'Negroes', which, of course, has no derogatory connotation in his case.

54 Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p. 128.

55 *Ibid.*, p. 163.

56 Niebuhr, *The Contribution of Religion to Social Work*, p. 64.

57 Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, p. 74.



Niebuhr points to the feebleness of love when it comes to economic and political collectivities. Groups, such as nations or tribes, do not love each other. There is a gap between individual morality, and collective ambitions. For the individual, the highest ideal can be love, expressed in the moral act done out of disinterested motives. Love thrives in intimate and personal relations. In such relations the highest form of mutuality—that is, giving without seeking mutual advantages—can be reached. Society, on the other hand, Niebuhr emphasizes, remains ‘something of the jungle’ where lives compete with each other because this competition is the natural state of affairs.<sup>58</sup> For society the highest moral ideal must be justice.<sup>59</sup> The awareness of the tragic tension between individual morality at its best, on the one hand, and collective strivings, on the other, never disappears from Niebuhr’s works. As individuals, humans may believe that ‘they ought to love and serve each other and establish justice between each other’; yet, ‘as racial, economic and national groups they take for themselves, whatever their power can command.’<sup>60</sup> This distinction between personal morality and collective morality is prominently present in Niebuhr’s earlier works. Persons driven by the ideal of love, more often than not, hit the wall built by collective egoism. In this sense, this distinction reflects realism and should be borne in mind in our struggles. It may prevent us from falling into resentment and from giving up our struggles.

John Marsden criticizes the above distinction as ‘deeply problematic because the two [personal and social moralities] are inextricably intertwined and to underestimate the social influence of sacrificial love is surely to fly in the face of human experience and forget the significance of the cross as a redemptive as well as a tragic symbol.’<sup>61</sup> Marsden’s criticism could be dismissed as misplaced since he seems to have confined himself to the earlier works of Niebuhr and has, therefore, not taken the latter’s development of thought into account. Yet, I would like to defend Niebuhr’s distinction, which was never a separation, as insightful and as a good antidote to religious sentimentalism (from which also public theology has to be protected). Marsden fails to realize that socio-economic structures can be dehumanizing and check the personal strivings to moral perfection. The metamorphosis that an ‘ordinary’ person—a devoted parent and friend—undergoes in particular contexts is what Hannah

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58 Ibid., p. 81.

59 Ibid., p. 257.

60 Ibid., p. 9.

61 John Marsden, ‘Reinhold Niebuhr and the Ethics of Christian Realism’, *International Journal of Public Theology*, 4:4 (2010), 483–501 at 497.



Arendt tries to convey in her *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.<sup>62</sup> The examples of ‘sacrificial love within families, for the meek and vulnerable, between friends, sometimes even towards enemies’ to which Marsden refers are examples of personal morality, and not of collective morality. Moreover, even in his earlier works, Niebuhr has never ceased to believe that though the ‘promise of new life’ holds for individual persons, ‘its relevance for nations and empires, for civilizations and cultures’ cannot be denied even if ‘these collective forms of life do not have the exact integrity of the individual soul’.<sup>63</sup>

In his later works, Niebuhr more explicitly explores the various manifestations of justice as the faces of love turned to the world. In the preface to the new edition of *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (1956), he explains that he, twenty-five years ago, believed, and still believes, that ‘love may be the motive of social action but that justice must be the instrument of love in a world in which self-interest is bound to defy the canons of love on every level’.<sup>64</sup> What has changed is that he has come to understand the ‘many intricacies in the relation of love to justice’.<sup>65</sup> Perhaps more explicitly and more emphatically, he maintains that the principles of justice such as ‘liberty, equality, and loyalty to covenants’ are ‘no more than the law of love in its various facets’.<sup>66</sup> Hence, he notes, that though the attempts to create order and mutuality out of the anarchy of interests and passions are less than the ideal of love, the latter ‘is involved in all approximations of justice’.<sup>67</sup> The ideal of love is both the source of all strivings for justice, and is the ultimate perspective by which existing concepts and practices of justice are judged. Along this line, the ideal of equality and impartiality becomes one of the facets of the ideal of love:

Since the law of love demands that all life be affirmed, the principle that all conflicting claims of life be equally affirmed is a logical approximation of the law of love in a world in which conflict is inevitable. The ideal of love and the ideal of equality therefore stand in an ascending scale of transcendence to the facts of existence.<sup>68</sup>

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62 Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (London: Penguin Books, 2006).

63 Niebuhr, *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, p. 107.

64 Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p. 9.

65 Ibid.

66 Niebuhr, *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, p. 129.

67 Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p. 128.

68 Ibid., pp. 135–136.

Hence, justice and love are no competing alternatives, on condition that love is not understood merely as an emotion or as philanthropy. Though the 'law of love' is no simple possibility, it 'must be enthroned as yet the final standard of every institution, structure and system of justice'.<sup>69</sup>

Justice is the visible face of love in collective affairs. This intimate relationship between justice and love is insufficiently taken into account by Jenny Anne Wright when she notes that 'due to the failure of love in our world, on both an individual and communal level, justice becomes the perfect aim in our imperfect world. Love completely ignores the self and pride [...]'.<sup>70</sup> All norms of justice, and especially, all strivings to greater justice, manifest the spirit of love. For Niebuhr, the gradual resolution of the tension between industrial owners and workers in modern industrial nations (in the West) is an illustration of not so much 'more adequate formulas of justice in some nations than in others' as a 'sense of justice', a disposition to 'give each man his due' and a loyalty to the national community.<sup>71</sup> Justice as the instrument of love combines 'the ultimate attitude with the immediate tragic task at hand'.<sup>72</sup> The moral choices that we make are often tragic choices, and reflect a partial, incomplete justice (and love).<sup>73</sup> The awareness of the tragic and partial character of our moral choices is an important precondition for striving for higher justice, while it also protects us from utopianism. Hence, though the spirit of love manifests itself in the spirit of justice, in its 'principles' such as liberty and equality, it does not exhaust itself in justice, any form of justice. It is always more than the spirit of justice since there is always the possibility of sacrificial love, which transcends all norms of justice.

#### 4 The Future of Prophetic Public Theology in the Politico-Economic Context

The public theology of Niebuhr uncovers the deeper spiritual root of our obsession with economic growth (and hence security), which is in turn the cause of uprooting, great injustices and an exhausted Earth. 'The phenomenon of self-seeking', Niebuhr notes, 'may be related, not to specific forms of insecurity,

69 Niebuhr, *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, p. 111.

70 Jenny Anne Wright, 'Justice between Fairness and Love? Christian Ethics in Dialogue with Rawls and Niebuhr', *International Journal of Public Theology*, 6:3 (2012), 306–328: 322.

71 Niebuhr, *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, p. 128.

72 Niebuhr, *Love and Justice*, p. 221.

73 *Ibid.*, p. 29.

but to the insecurity of life itself'.<sup>74</sup> Our incapacity to give up the growth paradigm and to establish a wholesome relation with our universe and our fellow beings stems from our being caught between despair and megalomania in our attitude to the universe.

No degree of economic security can finally obviate the basic insecurity of human existence, finally symbolized in the fact of death. [...] From the standpoint of the Christian faith no achievements of culture and civilization can finally give man security. On the contrary most of the evils of life arise from the fact that man seeks frantically to establish absolute security by his power, wisdom, or virtue.<sup>75</sup>

In hindsight, it seems natural that the spiritual condition of the modern human should be taken into account in trying to understand and improve our political-economic reality.<sup>76</sup> In view of the reigning disciplinary separation, the interpretation of that new condition has been confined to philosophy and theology; it has therefore only very rarely made its way into the disciplines that focus on our political-economic reality. Public theology could bridge that disciplinary gap. Our spiritual condition is marked by nihilism, which we have not been able to overcome since we have not come to terms with our universe—at the civilizational level. As Hans Jonas notes, 'the disruption between man and total reality is at the bottom of nihilism'.<sup>77</sup> Industrialization and technology have only reinforced this rift.

'Our problem', Niebuhr explains, 'is that technics have established a rudimentary world community but have not integrated it organically, morally, or politically'.<sup>78</sup> Globalization we certainly have, but this has not gone hand in hand with an expansion of mutual trust and respect, and of the sense of responsibility and solidarity. Instead, economic rivalries and power inequalities have been exacerbated. It has become more tempting and existentially (and psychologically) less burdensome not even to try to see our responsibilities and accept them. If our humanity consists in our capacity to discern and respond to the demands made on us, then the denial of responsibility is the denial of our own humanity.<sup>79</sup> In the present technical world, a call is made on

74 Niebuhr, *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, p. 18.

75 Niebuhr, *Faith and Politics*, pp. 162–164.

76 Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), p. 322.

77 *Ibid.*, p. 340.

78 Niebuhr, *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, p. 24.

79 Cf. Abraham J. Heschel, *Who is Man?* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1965), p. 106.

the human's 'conscious sense of responsibility for the welfare of others than those who are peculiarly his own'.<sup>80</sup> More than ever, the love of the neighbour is being demanded, precisely because we cannot rely on natural sympathy. We are being asked to accept the responsibility for the stranger. Indeed, 'love', says Niebuhr, 'means that life has no meaning except in terms of responsibility; responsibility toward our family, toward our nation, toward our civilization and, now, by the pressures of history, toward the universe of mankind which includes our enemies'.<sup>81</sup> Conversely, 'the essence of immorality', Niebuhr asserts, 'is the evasion or denial of moral responsibility'.<sup>82</sup> This holds for both individuals and collectives (nations, corporates, and other types of organizations).

A great challenge for public theology is to voice the moral responsibility that is incumbent on all of us by virtue of our shared humanity. The challenge lies especially in the fact that this sense of fellowship is constantly being undermined by various forms of partisanship and a highly competitive environment.

Both the sense of responsibility and the will to carry our responsibilities come under great strain when our environment is experienced as either a jungle or a bureaucratic maze, and when (therefore) the sense of moral and spiritual fellowship with others is lacking. Obligation is only felt towards a meaningful order, in which persons are related to each other as persons, and not as cogs in a huge machinery. This conceived connection between the experience of a meaningful order and willingness to accept responsibility is an insight that should become public knowledge. For Niebuhr the prophetic faith of Judaism and Christianity provides such a transcendent source of meaning. He emphasizes that the trust in the meaningfulness of life is not based on, or derived from, the perception of harmony in the world. Instead, it 'rests upon a faith in the final unity, which transcends the world's chaos as certainly as it is basic to the world's order'.<sup>83</sup> Such faith has generally been found in prophetic religions and has therefore informed the civilizations closely related to these religions. Such confidence in life is not a shallow optimism that denies the tragic facts of life. On the contrary, it is the result of looking 'into the bottomless abyss, on the edge of which all the citadels of faith are built'.<sup>84</sup>

Man comes to terms with his universe only by heroic and poetic insights, and he is nerved to undertake them only as he gains sufficient self-respect

80 Niebuhr, *Faith and Politics*, p. 155.

81 Reinhold Niebuhr, *Justice and Mercy*, ed. Ursula M. Niebuhr (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), p. 35.

82 Niebuhr, *Love and Justice*, pp. 177–178.

83 Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p. 44.

84 Niebuhr, *The Contribution of Religion to Social Work*, p. 73.

in his moral relationships to his fellow men to feel that the human spirit must be taken into account when the effort is made to penetrate the ultimate mysteries. Religion, which is the whole of man adjusting himself to the whole of life, involves precisely these two elements—poetic insight and moral vigor.<sup>85</sup>

Unity in our social life can be created by drawing on moral and cultural traditions—which include religious traditions—in which the world is perceived neither as meaningless nor as ‘unqualifiedly good’.<sup>86</sup>

This hope of unity, however, seems to hold for religious communities only. There seems to be an unbridgeable gap between the religious world and the secular one. Given the fact that a Christian understanding of the world and of the human—and the corresponding ‘cosmic order of meanings’—is no longer publicly accessible, it would seem that the ethic of love penetrates our secular context only if an academic and a politician happen to be religiously inspired.<sup>87</sup> Of course, the religious voice or the public theologian can also be heard in public debates. Small-scale initiatives informed by the ethic of love can be inspiring and edifying. There can be a snowball effect, in the positive sense. There are many little ways in which those driven by the ideal of love can influence their immediate milieus. They are not likely to change much, however, at the collective level—that is, our culture with its grandiose delusions—at least not in the near future. Are we then stuck with naturalistic materialism, which has permeated the academic and popular world? I think that this question, which I am inclined to answer positively, is far too big for the present conclusion. Let me then raise a more modest question: is the non-religious academic and policymaker doomed to choose among naturalistic materialistic conceptions of the human? My tentative answer is ‘no’.

Niebuhr’s audience includes the secular person. This aspiration characterizes any public theology. There must be some sort of middle way between the religious vision and the naturalist vision. The academic, policymaker, or any other person who wants to move beyond the limitations of the naturalistic approaches, and at the same time, does not wish to commit to a religious tradition, can still accept certain (religious) insights that have been profusely proven in human history and confirmed by experience. These insights, however, need to be translated and recast in such ways that they become accessible

85 Niebuhr, *Faith and Politics*, p. 69.

86 Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p. 100.

87 Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 512.

and acceptable to the non-religious person. Such translation certainly belongs to the domain of public theology. Naturalistic approaches lack realism, ignore (and deny) the spiritual nature of the human—and hence the spiritual nature of evil—and precisely because of their naivety, are oblivious to the will to power behind ideals (including economic and technological progress). In fact, the neutralization of vices has given it free rein. The agnostic can certainly accept the ideal of love as the highest ideal of human life. He or she can also acknowledge the need to allow his (her) love to be purified. That is to say, he (she) can recognize the other, less noble, motives that cohabit with love. Similarly, reason and experience confirm the need for a meaningful environment in order to thrive. The problem of existential mistrust can become the subject of discussion at school, for instance. An attempt to move beyond existing paradigms is exemplified by teleological behaviourism. Though the teleological behaviourist unfortunately does not escape the mechanical-causal framework and language, he at least tries to enlarge the ontology that underpins Skinnerian behaviourism, evolutionary psychology and biology by integrating some sort of virtue ethics.<sup>88</sup> A more courageous move requires a collective revision of the dominant understanding of ‘scientific’ and ‘academic’.

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88 See Howard Rachlin, ‘Altruism and Selfishness’, in *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 25 (2002), 239–296.