

RACE & JUSTICE

Reinhold Niebuhr exhibited a lifelong concern for social justice. Improving race relations was central to his vision for how to build a more just society.

Niebuhr first immersed himself in race issues while serving as a pastor in Detroit in the 1920s. His vocal opposition to the Ku Klux Klan garnered the attention of Detroit's Catholic mayor, who asked Niebuhr to chair the city's Interracial Committee in 1925. In collaboration with African American and Jewish leaders, Niebuhr confronted the intractable character race issues both in Detroit and in the nation as a whole. This work shaped his subsequent activism. In the 1930s, he helped found the Delta Farm Cooperative, an integrated farming community in Mississippi; supported the creation of the Highlander Folk School, which would go on to become a training center for civil rights activists; and advocated on behalf of the Jews as fascism took hold in Europe. During World War II Niebuhr spoke out against Japanese Internment and was among the first religious leaders to make a case of the formation of the state of Israel. He would also weigh in on race issues at various critical junctures of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 1960s.

For all its complexities, Niebuhr's approach to social justice was based on a straightforward insight: to obtain justice, we need to strive for love. Love requires us to place the needs of others before our own. Racism, however, is the product of one social group asserting its own needs and desires at the expense of another social group—a pattern of behavior that Niebuhr described as group egoism. This contradicted love at such a basic level that Niebuhr considered racism "one form of original sin." But precisely because it springs from such deep place of sin, racism is extraordinarily difficult to uproot. In the American context in particular the work of exposing, confronting, and overcoming racism would be arduous indeed, yet absolutely necessary to building a just society.

Some believe Niebuhr's legacy on race is mixed. On the one hand, he advocated more strongly and consistently on behalf of minority groups than virtually any other prominent white leader of his day, especially in the early part of his career. On the other hand, like the great majority of white leaders, he urged moderation at pivotal junctures during which the Civil Rights Movement required decisive support. This is partly because, while Niebuhr was able to perceive the group dynamics of racism, he didn't quite grasp its structural dimensions. Thus he wasn't able to fully appreciate the dire need for the sorts of structural interventions that the Civil Rights Movement sought. Despite these shortcomings, he remains one of our most incisive voices on issues of race and justice.

Questions to consider:

In what ways do we continue to see racism at work in American society?

Why are racial tensions so difficult to resolve?

What steps do we need to take as a society for the dream of racial justice to become reality?

Consider the following quote:

"Minority groups are thought 'bad' only because they diverge from the dominant type and affront that type by their divergence." – Jews After the War, Part II (Feb 28, 1942) MW, 646.

Do you agree? Why or why not?

-- Law of Love --

Niebuhr Quotes:

I find it impossible to envisage a society of pure love as long as man is man.
-D.B. Robertson, ed., *Love and Justice*, 13).

The Christian conception of the relation of historical justice to the love of the Kingdom of God is a dialectical one. Love is both the fulfillment and the negation of all achievements of justice in history. -NDM II, 246 (LJ, 16)

Insofar as justice admits the claims of the self, it is something less than love. Yet it cannot exist without love and remain justice. For without the "grace" of love, justice always degenerates into something less than justice. -"Justice and Love," C&S, Fall 1950 (LJ 26)

The realization of our general involvement in the evils of racial prejudice must not prompt us to inaction when particularly flagrant forms of the sins we all commit challenge our conscience. The fact that we all violate the law of love in some way or other ought not to obscure to our conscience the force of that law.
-"What resources can the Christian church offer to meet crisis in race relations?" *The Messenger*, April 3, 1956

From the standpoint of biblical faith we do not have to despair because life is so brief, but we must not pretend to be more because we are so great. Because we are both small and great, we have discerned a mystery and a meaning beyond our own smallness and greatness, and a justice and a love which completes our incompletions, which corrects our judgments, and which brings the whole story to a fulfillment beyond our power to fulfill any story.
-"The Wheat and the Tares (MW 886)

Questions to consider:

What does Niebuhr mean when he says above that Justice "cannot exist without *love* and remain justice?"

Do you agree? Why or why not?

Transcript for clip -- "*Race & Justice: Law of Love*" :

Lisa Cahill:

So "structures of brotherhood" is his way of talking about social institutions in their capacity to be bearers of justice and encouragers of just behavior. So on the one hand social institutions frequently and maybe even more often serve the interests of the powerful who constructed them and who want to perpetuate the status quo. So those are the structures of injustice. That's the immoral society that he speaks of in a book that is partly by that, you know uses that phrase in the title. 08:53:34 But the structures of brotherhood is where we see the positive potential of grace in history. We see the kingdom of God which is not a universal human category or a, a national political category in the United States but it's the Christian way of expressing the social presence of grace.

And the kingdom of god in political and social terms is structures of brotherhood. That it is possible to enact better laws. It is possible to demonstrate on behalf of civil rights as did Martin Luther King. It is possible to affirm the equality of women. Surely it's not immediately realized, but have we made progress, yes we have. So the, the structures of justice are social patterns of behavior through which we protect and encourage more just relationships in society. And you know one of his basic categories of course would be love and justice, two categories I guess together. And he always says that, that justice needs to be encouraged by love. And mutual love is the highest possibility of history but that needs to be stimulated by some element of self-sacrificial love. So the, the Christian contribution in his view is to keep offering that and stimulating that, putting that into the mix, and creating more fellow feeling, more sense of solidarity among human beings more broadly. And then finally more justice in society and that would be the structures of justice or the structures of brotherhood. Sisterhood of course today we would also say.

Gary Dorrien: Jimmy Carter has said on more than one occasion that one of the great regrets of his life is that he never met Reinhold Niebuhr. And that symbolizes something, that Carter himself, like other people who have held office, who are sincerely Christian, who have a sort of Christian background, or are...for whom Christianity is important, but also exercise power and sometimes need to do bad things in exercising power, Niebuhr is the symbol, if nothing else, even if you haven't read a great deal of Niebuhr. What you tend to know is that he is the person who symbolizes this very problem you are sitting with, if you are someone like Jimmy Carter or Barack Obama, who is thinking about What does it mean for me to exercise this power in a morally responsible way? Because he is always dealing with that question, that there's this Christianity, the love ethic of Jesus does provide, that Niebuhr himself says a kind of ethic of love perfectionism that's very difficult to say what that means in the hardball world of politics. And Niebuhr is so concerned to say Politics is a hard-ball realm. It's the realm of power and interest. And yet somehow these two things have to be held together, at least that's the project, that's the work of Christian social ethics. And so even if you haven't read a great deal of Niebuhr, you do know that that struggling with both sides of that dialectic are on every page of Niebuhr. And then of course it becomes existential if you are literally sitting in power.

Robin Lovin:

At the beginning of the 20th century, there was a movement of realism, or what was sometimes called real-politik that was very common in the European and American world, and the whole idea behind that kind of realism was to be serious about self interest and ignore moral ideals. Niebuhr's idea of Christian realism was you have to be serious about self-interest, you have to be especially interested in your own self-interest, but you can't ignore the power of ideals like love and justice. So, Christian realism is not about ignoring moral, spiritual ideas, it's about being realistic about their impact on particular situations.

Robin Lovin: In a passage in *The Irony of American History*, Niebuhr really shows how deeply his whole world of thought is shaped by Biblical models and so that he turns to faith, hope, and love, the traditional theological virtues from first Corinthians 13, and basically says that we can't give meaning to the things that we do in his history without these 3 things that really transcend history. We have to have trust in a judgment that lies beyond our own judgment. We have to have hope beyond the results of our actions that we can see and finally we have to have love that keeps us from just being locked into our own self-interest. Those things taken by themselves won't give you a political program, but without faith, hope, and love, you'll never have the motivation and the broad understanding of the human situation to invest your life in changing realities for the people who share this society with you.