

Sin & Democracy

“Democracy,” Winston Churchill once observed, “is the worst form of government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.”

Niebuhr would have agreed: though admittedly an imperfect system, democracy works better with the realities of human sinfulness than any other form of government. Niebuhr believed that while times may change, human nature stays the same. And he thought that Christian concept of original sin captured the heights and depths of the human experience—what French philosopher Blaise Pascal called the “glory and misery of man”—in a uniquely effective way.

Original sin describes the self-serving element in our interactions. When a child refuses to share their toy, when we resent the success of our peers, when we do hurtful things to those we love—this all suggests a deep-seated tendency in human nature to manipulate others to our benefit. Niebuhr once quipped that original sin “emphasizes a fact [to] which every page of human history attests.”

This is not to say that humans can’t be good. As beings made in God’s image, we have been blessed with a sense of right and wrong and with the ability to enact good in the world. But ulterior motives seep into even our best actions, suggesting that our self-serving tendencies are too deeply embedded for us to dislodge on our own.

This has direct implications for how we should organize our societies. Original sin implies that human beings tend to misuse power. This means that governments function best when they have mechanisms that prevent any particular individual or group from accumulating too much power. Hence why the democratic system of checks and balances is so important: it plays the interests of the various branches of government against each other such that they hold each other accountable.

Democracy is not without its problems. Checks and balances can be frustratingly inefficient, making democracies slow to respond to political situations that require swift, decisive action. But for Niebuhr, democracy did a better job than any other system of government of protecting human beings from their own worst tendencies. This made democracy the best system of government, regardless of what its flaws might be.

Questions to consider:

What is sin? How does it manifest in our lives? How does it manifest in politics?

Is the system of checks and balances an effective way of coping with our sinful tendencies?
Why or why not?

From Niebuhr’s perspective, how might democracy fit the needs of human nature better than other forms of government, such as monarchy or communism?

-- Government --

Niebuhr Quotes:

Human nature as basis of government

- Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man's inclination for injustice makes democracy necessary. -CL (MW 454)
- Ideally democracy is a permanently valid form of government which does justice to two dimensions of human existence: to man's spiritual stature and his social character; to the uniqueness and variety of life, and to the common necessities of all men. -CL (MW 358)

Democracy

- The preservation of democratic civilization requires the wisdom of the serpent and the harmlessness of the dove. -CL (MW 378)
- Democracy is a method of finding proximate solutions to insoluble problems. -CL (MW 420)

Freedom and Order

- Since the community may more easily become inordinate in its passion for order, as may the various forces in the community in their passion for freedom, it is necessary to preserve a proper balance between both principles, and to be as ready to champion the individual against the community as the community against the individual. -CL (MW 398)

Transcript for clip -- "*Sin & Democracy: Government*" :

Gaston: So Niebuhr's involvement in the interventionist cause in the early 40's, his founding of Christianity and Crisis as an alternative to the pacifist Christian Century, his incredible desire to see Americans weigh in and join this cause, because really central to his identity in the post-war world. Niebuhr writes these incredibly influential books that are the Gifford lectures that he publishes about the nature and destiny of man, that really sort of gives us a portrait of like why it is that the Christian view of human nature has this ability to explain human experience that is not shared by any other view. So he sees this as the best of possible options. And then in *The Children of Light* and *The Children of Darkness*, he says this is the essence of democracy. The Christian view of human nature gives us access to the sort of need for balance of power, the need for humility, the entire democratic project revolves around a Christian view of human nature. And so you have that sort of movement of these claims into the center of the American discussion of democracy at a time when Europe is in ruins and this country is in a position that it has never been in before. It's a world power that has the responsibilities to decide the fate of the world. And that's a lot of pressure and it's something that Niebuhr is able to help Americans come to term with and to think through in ways that are very compelling.

West: At the time the book was published, varieties of liberal theology were highly influential. And the common denominator of these liberal theologies, tended to downplay the tragic dimensions of the human condition. The ways in which all of us are, in some sense, shot through with greed and envy and resentment. What Christian theologians will traditionally call "sin". So the liberal theologians began...the liberal theologians were claiming that we were on the road to progress, that human beings were perfectible, that there was a possibility of some Utopian society in history. It was a kind

of captivity to a highly fashionable, secular claim about what the future could be. Niebuhr comes in with this tragic sensibility, Augustinian sensibility. He says No, we all have fallen, we all are finite, we all are fallible. There will never be a Utopian society in human history, there will never be paradise in space and time. That we all are corrupt in terms of the choices that we make. So it's not in any way just a matter of good on the one side, evil on the other. The good and evil shut through our souls, there's a civil war taking place on the battlefields of our hearts, each and every one of us, no matter what color, gender, sexual orientation, civilization. And so it's more of an orthodox Christian view, but what he did was he wedded that to a left wing politics. Usually that sort of left wing view is associated with Conservatism. He used that Augustinian analysis, that deep sense of the tragic, he says Look, when it comes to individuals we're corrupt, when it comes to collectivities they are worse. So it's going to be very much about power, it's going to be very much about conflict. And the best we can do as human beings is generate democratic possibilities. Democracy, he says, is an approximate solution to insoluble problems. We're never going to get at the insecurities and fears and anxieties that sit at the center of who we are. We're never gonna eliminate the kind of evil choices that follow from the kind of freedom we have. Of the kind of choices we have in the world. But democracy provides for fallible, fallen creatures, some mechanisms of accountability to keep track of our proclivities towards corruption. Of our evil orientations towards hatred, domination, exploitation, and so forth. And in many ways, I think he's right.

Bacevich: The American form of pride is this conviction that we are innocent, and therefore that, as...an innocent party, we are the injured party. As the innocent party, we are...are motives are not to be questioned. And of course he again pushes back strongly against such...such claims that insisting that No we are not innocent, that we too are subject to the effects of original sin. I mean, as a...Catholic, I have to tell you that his emphasis on original sin to me is...is of enduring importance. That yes, we are all fallen, we too...we in this country, we the people who insist that we came into existence in order to become this city upon the hill, in order to bring perfection to the rest of humanity. No, no, no, we too are not innocent, we too are imperfect.

Hauerwas: What is democracy? Democracy is social and political orders that keep open the possibility of group intensification to balance injustices from other groups. So a balance, a power, is at the heart of democratic societies that keep open new possibilities to make possible the enfranchisement of those who currently without power. He got that from the struggle of the labor unions in Detroit. I mean, that was the kind of conflict that he thought was at the heart of democratic social alternatives.