

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?

-- Gender --

Niebuhr's depiction of pride as the root cause of sin aptly conveys the spiritual challenges that confront people in positions of power. But how well does it describe the spiritual struggles of the powerless? More specifically: does it capture the core struggles of women? Or does it overlook fundamental aspects of their experience?

If we see pride—that is, the tendency to put oneself before others—as the most basic form of sin, then the focus of the moral life should be to subdue pride by putting others before oneself. But feminist critics of Niebuhr have pointed out that this approach assumes that human beings have strong egos. While this is often true of men, it is not generally true of women.

Men in our culture are socialized to be assertive: they are praised for taking initiative and encouraged to hone their leadership skills. Women, by contrast, are socialized to focus on what others think of them: they are praised for being personable and are pressured to meet unrealistic beauty standards. These socialization patterns lead to different moral struggles. Whereas men struggle to rein in their robust sense of self, women struggle to cultivate a sense of self to begin with. If women follow Niebuhr's advice to subdue the ego, they tear down the very thing they need to build in order to be responsible moral agents in the world.

The feminist critique, then, pushes us to nuance our view of original sin. While it continues to be true that sin distorts all of us, the way gender roles function in our society causes these distortive effects to manifest differently. Consequently, men and women—and more broadly, the powerful and the powerless—must adopt distinct strategies for addressing sin's consequences.

Questions to consider:

How are women socialized in our society?
How does this differ from the way that men are socialized?

Do you agree with the feminist contention that gender shapes the moral challenges we confront as individuals? *Why or why not?*

Transcript for clip -- "*Sin & Democracy: Gender*" : *Pride, Power, and Sin*

Gaston: I think feminist critics of Niebuhr are getting at something that actually is very much the same kind of line that you see in liberation theology's critique of a Niebuhrian perspective which is just this idea that this is a theology that speaks to the predicament of the powerful. And that offers a corrective in the form of this recognition of pride, but doesn't have the same impact for the powerless. Do the powerless need to be reminded of their prideful status? Or do they need to be reminded of the sin of hiding their gifts. Right, do they need to be encouraged in different kinds of ways?

Cahill: His view was that human beings are caught between those two things, nature and freedom. And creating a state of anxiety and anxiety is a state of temptation. The only real way to resolve this is to trust in god and Jesus Christ. But if we try to trust in something different that is sin and we inevitably do that. and the primary form of sin is to trust in oneself. And not god so it's pride, self-interest. What Augustine called the libido dominandi which Niebuhr definitely recognized. That is the lust for domination. You know the attempt to control and dominate other people. So all of those are manifestations of pride. He, he did say though that there's another type of sin that's also running away from a positive reconciliation of this tension and that's what he called sensuality. And that's just immersing ourselves in some of the goods or temptations of, of ordinary life. Often he named those with the usual suspects, sexual licentiousness, drink-in-ness and so on. But he meant something broader by it.

Feminist Critiques

Cahill: So the feminist critique is that for many women the sin, the basic and underlying sin is not pride. It is a, it is the inability and sort of the running away from our hiding from the challenge to have an identity and to really make a difference and to have commitments and plans and principles that one courageously pursues and defends, no matter what the obstacles. So women just to name some of the famous interlocutors Valerie Sabin, Judith Plaskow, Daphne Hanson, Beverly Harrison. They said that what women need is not to be told that they are excessively proud, the remedy for which is love and self-sacrifice as the men are told. But rather they need to be told not to completely dissipate their own agency through acts presumably of self-sacrifice for other people so women need completely the opposite of vice. And one of the in doing, well first of all I think that that's completely correct. So the feminists critics are right. But there is an enduring question that also arises from all of this that we can see in Niebuhr's writings and in the feminist critique. And it really is how much of human nature is if you will biologically or evolutionarily determined. If humans are not to be seen as completely divided from other species, how many of the characteristics of other mammals or most other mammals do we have. You know do those vary by gender and if so to what degree. Today we have a great you know scientific and also popular interest in neuropsychology. Evolutionary biology, mind brain studies. So I, I think that what Niebuhr is really putting out there is the possibility that there are strong connections between and even limits on, connections between our physiological make up and our agency, identity and freedom. And that the former in some ways constrains the latter. Or maybe a more positive way to put it is, our freedom has certain working materials. And we need to know what those are so that we can construct meaningful human lives. Do those vary by gender? That's a very dangerous thing to say. Because differences universally are used to women's disadvantage and to subordinate women. And limit women's social opportunities and power. Nevertheless I don't think it's a question that feminists can afford to run away from. you know the, the, the challenge is to look at the problem, consider the evidence. Be very critical of illegitimate political uses, particularly those that disadvantage women.

Recommendations for Further Reading

- Federalist 10
- The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness
- "Man's disorder and God's design" (Niebuhr's World Council of Churches address, 1948. Perhaps we can make the audio available on the site).