

Reinhold Niebuhr and the Ability of Religion to Generate Social Justice

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May 2001

Towards Social Justice

Reinhold Niebuhr was motivated by his desire to create social justice. While Niebuhr never articulated a clear definition of justice in his writings, he made it clear that his overarching goal was to divine a method to improve social justice. Niebuhr understood justice as a relative term, which could only be discussed in its historical context. However, Niebuhr did believe that justice should ideally contain some basic elements. Niebuhr asserted that justice is dependent on a “balance of power” (Harland 53, 1960). A just society ensures that all people have access to the instruments of power, and differing interests have equal opportunities to compete for resources. A just society provides “the diffusion and balancing of power” (Harland 25, 1960). In addition, the highest forms of justice will incorporate equality among the members of society (Harland 1960). So while Niebuhr would not articulate a final form of justice because he believed it was entirely relative, he was able to identify at least some elements that he considered to be the core of a better justice.

In order to achieve the greatest amount of justice in society, Niebuhr considered a number of political and social movements. Niebuhr considered grass roots activism and revolutionary Marxism before finally concluding that democracy was the best method to guarantee social justice (Merkley 1975). But Niebuhr was not satisfied with traditional descriptions of democracy. Niebuhr proposed that conventional forms of democracy, such as that advocated by John Locke, lacked the moral resources to create greater amounts of justice. In fact, Niebuhr also proposed that

the ideals behind traditional liberal democracy left liberal democratic governments open to assault from forces that could actually reduce the overall justice of a society. Niebuhr reasoned that traditional liberal democracy created a great deal of freedom for the individual, particularly in the realm of economics. From this economic sphere it becomes possible for one individual to pay low wages, create terrible work environments or harass workers. This situation reduces the amount of justice in society, and shows the lack of true justice in traditional liberal democracy. Upon realizing this flaw in liberal democracy, Niebuhr suggested a method to correct the flaws of liberal democracy. In order to amend liberal democracy and make it more just, Niebuhr argued for a liberal democratic culture informed with Christian values (Stone 1972). Niebuhr proposed a unique vision of liberal democracy, which has the potential to effectively create a more just society. This approach to redeeming liberal democracy is particularly important in the modern context. Clearly, modern liberal democracies are still facing problems of intolerance, crime, and social irresponsibility. In addition, recently President George W. Bush has proposed a faith-based initiative, which would use federal funds to assist religious orders that provide social services (Bush 2001). Thus, in the modern political context, Niebuhr's approach of mixing government with religious values seems to have come to fruition. Thus, the topic of the role of religious values in public life is very relevant. In order to understand how Niebuhr would create this more just society it is necessary to examine the benefits and problems of traditional liberal democracy, and finally discuss the advantages and pitfalls of incorporating Christian-influenced values into modern democratic governments.

The Political Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr

Reinhold Niebuhr's vision of democracy contains two primary aspects. First, Niebuhr was preoccupied with social justice. Second, Niebuhr argued that religious values could play a key component in fulfilling his desires of achieving greater social justice. To begin, Niebuhr has a true and deep concern for the fate of humanity. Justice, for Niebuhr, was more than just a negative freedom that ensured individual liberty and equal opportunity. Niebuhr endorsed a stronger formulation of justice, which incorporated ideals of empowerment and positive freedoms, such as economic equality. Niebuhr's politics were progressive, and he was preoccupied with improving the welfare of the masses (Tracy 1996). Niebuhr endorsed approaches from social movements to

Communist revolutions to attain a more just society (Merkley 1975). Additionally, Niebuhr's dedication to justice manifested itself in a very flexible manner. Niebuhr was willing to consider many ideas, revise, and reject those that he found incapable of creating justice. Niebuhr's flexibility makes him a pragmatist (Anderson 1990). Niebuhr was willing to change his approach, if he believed his current approach was unable to create justice (Harland 1960). Thus, Niebuhr shows his concern for humanity by shifting to ideas which he believes are actually capable of helping people. Niebuhr exhibited an acute sense of social responsibility. Niebuhr was dedicated to creating a better society, and to advance this idea, he was willing to consider a wide array of approaches.

While it is important to realize that Niebuhr was dedicated to progressive ideas, it is essential to be aware of the role that religion played in Niebuhr's politics. Religion was central to Niebuhr's progressive politics (Merkley 1975). In fact, Niebuhr's political goal of justice results from his religious beliefs. Niebuhr believed that unconditional love was the core value of religion; arguing, "a religions ethic makes love the ideal" (Niebuhr 57, 1960b). Niebuhr would have society based on agape, or a love of community (Stone 1972). Niebuhr's love ethic was absolute, pure, and entailed the individual deferring their needs before the needs of others (Harland 1960). This formulation of religion would provide the foundation for a public commitment to greater social justice by establishing an emphatic bond between people and stimulating kindness through love.

While Niebuhr did hold his love ethic in the highest regard, he was aware of the flaw that agape love was not a practical foundation from which to build an effective political agenda. While there may be a need for more love in the world in order to create peace and justice, there is a distinct problem with this approach. Simply put, it is very questionable whether each individual can really be expected to love everyone. Niebuhr's approach, while capable of bestowing benefits such as peaceful coexistence, seems nearly impossible to put in the practice. Niebuhr realized this flaw when he stated, "all men cannot be expected to be spiritual" (Niebuhr 73, 1960b). Additionally, this selfless agape love would be competing for dominance among nationalism, self-interest, reason, and other political ideologies. So, love may be unable to motivate all people. More troublesome is that Niebuhr's love ethic has the goal of being completely selfless. A selfless

individual is at risk of exploitation from other individuals. While this arguably may be an acceptable risk for the individual, Niebuhr asserts that a leader does not have the right to be selfless and place his or her followers at risk. Since modern society is based around government and international interaction, it would be morally irresponsible for a legislator to put her constituency at risk because of her own belief in a selfless love ethic (Niebuhr 1960b). Thus, Niebuhr viewed love as a naïve and impractical tool that would be unable to achieve the hoped for results of social harmony in the 'real' world.

The realization that love was an unsuitable approach to politics rightly led Niebuhr to other considerations. Niebuhr ultimately hailed justice as an imperfect but sufficient replacement for love. Justice is the real world, relativistic, political version of love. Justice is neither as powerful nor transcendent as love. In fact, love is more important than justice (Harland 1960). However, Niebuhr claimed that justice was "the relative social embodiment of love and as such it is an approximation of love" (Harland 23, 1960). Niebuhr argued "harmonious social relations depend upon the sense of justice as much as, or more than, upon the sentiment of benevolence" (Niebuhr 29, 1960b). Niebuhr believed that justice was a necessary component for a good society, and an imperfect but suitable replacement for a love ethic. Niebuhr maintained that a society with greater justice was also a society with greater amounts of love. Justice is simply an imperfect replacement for love with more realistic goals. As mentioned previously, Niebuhr argued that justice derives from an equitable division of resources whether economic, political, or otherwise. Thus competing factions would not be influenced by a love ethic that might deny themselves potential benefits (Niebuhr 1960b). But under a justice ethic they would be restrained from monopolizing or exploitative behavior. Through this thought process, Niebuhr realizes that his goal is to create a just society because a society mobilized under the superior love ethic is too difficult to achieve and ultimately unwarranted because of the efficacy of justice. Thus it is possible to witness the important and influential role that religion played in shaping Niebuhr's thought. Justice was central to Niebuhr's thought; intimately held because of its close association with his religious ideals. It is evident that politics and religion were interactive for Niebuhr, and justice was a goal he felt motivated to seek because of religious obligation.

With a better understanding of the source of Niebuhr's political thought, including an understanding of the importance of progressive change and religion in Niebuhr's life, it is now possible to begin the discussion of how Niebuhr would achieve greater social justice. This study intends to examine the role that religion played in Niebuhr's quest for justice. Primarily, Niebuhr asserted that religious values could create a democracy that was more just. This study will examine what values Niebuhr argues need to be incorporated into democracy, and how those values will improve society. In addition, this study will also discuss the potential benefits and problems with Niebuhr's religious approach to democracy.

Benefits of Democracy

Niebuhr argued that democracy was the political system that had the most potential to create justice in society. Niebuhr considered other political solutions to the problem of justice. Perhaps most infamously, Niebuhr flirted with the idea of Communism's ability to establish political and economic justice (Niebuhr 1960b). Ultimately, Niebuhr realized that Communism was a utopian vision that placed too much power in the hands of the few (Niebuhr 1960a; Niebuhr 1977). Realizing these flaws in Communism, Niebuhr began to consider other possibilities to form a more just society. Niebuhr believed that democracy had the ability to create social justice because of its purported dedication to ideals of political equality, compromise, and liberty. In addition, Niebuhr believed that democracy provided a political system that was conducive for fashioning a more just society because the source of power was the citizens, who could then direct government according to their own needs.

Niebuhr believed that liberal democracy could attain a more just society because it was based upon ideals that sought the overall betterment of society. Niebuhr admired ideals such as pluralism, liberty, equality, democratic elections, and the capacity to change. Niebuhr argued that liberal democracy has "a touching faith in the possibility of achieving a simple harmony," where people can coexist and settle disputes in a non-violent manner (Niebuhr 7, 1960a). A liberal system is really interested in achieving the betterment of both individuals and society as a whole (Niebuhr 1960). Niebuhr admired this goal. Niebuhr decided that liberal democracy was a political system that was consistent with his own values of achieving social justice. Niebuhr argued that liberal democracy was a system with core values that were positive and utilitarian; this

approach was capable of increasing social justice. Niebuhr also approved of free democratic elections, because through them it was possible for the citizens to voice their needs and take action to have their concerns met. Since Niebuhr argued that liberal democracy had potential to generate greater amounts of justice, he chose it as his ideal political system.

Niebuhr not only approved of the positive vision of liberal democracy, he also respected the sense of responsibility that was inherent in liberal democracy. Liberal democracy is generally understood to be a free society, with certain rights such as freedom of speech, open elections, equality, protection of privacy, the right to assemble, religious tolerance, and so on. Niebuhr admired the guaranteed rights and liberties which liberal democracy provided (Niebuhr 1960a). Many of these values, such as equality, are consistent with Niebuhr's own description of a just society. Liberal democracy is a system in which an individual's rights are protected to some extent. Since rights are clearly labeled, and a system is established by which these rights can be defended, a situation is created where individuals are aware of their rights and are in a position to gain new rights or halt the removal of existing rights. Thus, liberal democratic societies are ones in which justice has some type of formal protection. This system makes liberal democracy resistant to tyranny and injustice. Niebuhr admired this burgeoning responsibility in liberal democracy. Thus, Niebuhr admired the values behind liberal democracy that were optimistic while providing for the protection of what justice has already been achieved.

While Niebuhr admired the value system that formed the liberal democratic thought, he also approved of the institutional political system of liberal democracy. Niebuhr attested that the most important instrumental manifestation of liberal democracy was the emphasis on controlled power. Liberal democracy distributes power among different branches and individuals, creating a situation where there is no centralized or all-powerful figure (Niebuhr 1960a). Niebuhr argued this distribution of power was an ingenious method to prevent tyranny from arising. A system of diffused power relations allows individuals to seek power in their own society. Because the power is so heavily divided, no individual or faction can easily establish a monopoly on all the power (Stone 1972). The accumulation of power in the hands of a few would have negative tyrannical implications and would be detrimental to the sanctity of liberal democratic ideals. So, liberal democracy allows for people to satisfy their need to achieve power without endangering the

democratic character of society as a whole. Niebuhr argued that a well-formulated liberal democracy should be able to avoid problems with unchecked powers running rampant (Niebuhr 1960). Niebuhr supported the controlled political atmosphere that was created in a liberal democracy because he felt it was a secure system resistant to injustices, such as the arbitrary abuse of power.

While political control was the primary instrumental benefit of liberal democracy, Niebuhr also approved of the malleable nature of liberal democracy. Niebuhr argued that liberal democracy is one of the few political systems that is open and accepting of internal criticism (Niebuhr 1960a). More importantly, the internal criticism is actually capable of eliciting change in liberal democratic society. Since liberal democracy is democratic, and responsive to its citizens, it is possible for individuals to create change, albeit slowly at times (Niebuhr 1960a). Additionally, Niebuhr was receptive to the fact that change was never complete in a liberal democracy. Since change in liberal democratic society is dependent on a legislature and executive branch at the least, as well as opposition from other groups, all of the solutions achieved will be proximate (Harland 1960). Niebuhr believed that absolute solutions were not possible in an earthly context. In fact, a belief in absolute solutions can be dangerous according to Niebuhr (Niebuhr 1960a). Liberal democracy is a system designed where ongoing dialogue is necessary and proximate solutions are the only variety of solutions possible. So, Niebuhr approved of the ability of liberal democracy to be flexible, as well as its dedication to incomplete but plausible solutions. Overall, Niebuhr approved of liberal democracy because it appeared to be a system with values with benefited society encapsulated in a system that controlled power and prevented tyranny.

Flaws in Liberal Democracy

Despite his positive endorsement of liberal democracy as a political system with the potential to enact just practices, Niebuhr also suggested that liberal democracy was seriously flawed. Niebuhr argued that these flaws were so extreme that they were a legitimate threat to liberal democracy's continuation as well as the justice that liberal democracy was capable of achieving. The major flaw of liberal democracy is its optimistic evaluation of human nature. Niebuhr argues that liberal democracy is "a wave of boundless social optimism...[which rejects] the Christian doctrine of original sin" (Niebuhr 16, 1960a). This initial optimism about human

nature evolves into a sense of aggressive individualism, which has created a destructive modern society. In order to understand this flaw of liberal democracy, and its evolution into a destructive force, it is necessary to first establish the source of liberal democracy's optimism about human nature. Liberal democracy assumes that people are essentially rational creatures. John Locke and utilitarian thinkers present theories that are based on the individual being ruled exclusively by an unadulterated inner reason (Niebuhr 1960a). This inner reason guides individuals to the understanding that counterproductive for the individual to act purely selfishly; instead, it is better to act to improve the situation of the group. Unfortunately, the premise that reason has an inherent moral component is flawed; reliance on reason alone is incapable of creating moral behavior. Too often, theorists such as Locke propose that reason can "transmute egotism into a concern for the general welfare" (Niebuhr 27, 1960a). Liberal thinkers assume that people are rational and always behave rationally, and thus for the good of humanity and not their own self-interest.

The belief that people are rational, and hence good, has led to an endorsement of strong individualism in modern society. Liberal democracy presupposes that people will act rationally, and those rational actions will improve society. So few political or economic restraints are placed upon people because liberal democrats assume achievements by individuals in these areas will benefit all. Some individuals utilize this freedom to amass large amounts of power that can be difficult to control. In addition, the growth of individualism creates an atmosphere that is oblivious to the unavoidable interdependence of individuals within a society; thus, a situation is created where those who are in need of assistance may have difficulty finding it. An individualistic society may be one without concern for the general welfare and without adequate social programs to assist the less fortunate (Niebuhr 1960b). Individualistic societies also generate laws and measures to influence and protect the individual, and not the group. Thus groups may either exhibit large amounts of power or be subject to great amounts of suffering which traditional liberal democracy is not designed to address (Niebuhr 1960b). Hence, liberal democracy is an optimistic system that fosters an individualistic approach to all aspects from society, including government and economics.

The fundamental flaw of this optimistic approach, according to Niebuhr, is that neither humanity nor instrumental reason is as benevolent as liberal theorists presume. Niebuhr argues,

“human intelligence is never as pure an instrument of the universal perspective as the liberal democratic theory assumes” (Niebuhr 29, 1960a). Niebuhr believes that people are not always completely rational, and that irrational impulses are very powerful. Among the powerful forces that play a role in the human condition is self-interest (Harland 1960; Merkley 1975). Modern liberal thinkers assume that self-interest is weak and unimportant. Niebuhr argues the opposite. Niebuhr views self-interest as an intrinsic and powerful force in human nature. Niebuhr does not believe that poorly designed institutions produce evil people (Niebuhr 1960a). Niebuhr believes that people are naturally capable of evil, whether consciously or unconsciously (Harland 1960). Niebuhr believes that original sin is real, and influences all people to act in an antisocial manner (Niebuhr 1960a). This different understanding of human nature leads to a significant split between Niebuhr and traditional liberal democracy; Niebuhr is assaulting the very foundation of liberal ideas. Niebuhr asserts that liberal democracy’s positive evaluation of human nature leaves it open to exploitation by self-interested forces, or even tyranny. Essentially, liberal democracy is a system that has not erected sufficient defenses against the more negative aspects of humanity.

This optimistic view of human nature has, in accordance with Niebuhr’s predictions, led to a negative impact on society. For example, while the United States maintains a political realism which admits the evils of human nature, oftentimes the lessons of a self-interested humanity are forgotten when the economic sphere is considered (Niebuhr 1960). The United States is an intensely capitalist system, and it is often assumed that the forces of capitalism will benefit all of society. Niebuhr argues that this assumption is overly optimistic, and displays too much faith in individualism by allowing individuals to pursue their own economic interests without restraint. Niebuhr argues if individuals are allowed to pursue their economic ends without any type of control, an individual can obtain sufficient property so that he will become “strong enough to become an instrument of aggression and usurpation” (Niebuhr 99, 1960a). Thus some individuals will gain unwarranted and potentially dangerous economic superiority by gaining capital. In order to continue pursuing economic greatness, individuals with capital will exploit workers under poor conditions and at low wages. Those without capital will be ground down by society (Niebuhr 1960b). Since liberal society creates an individualistic atmosphere, workers have very little recourse because society undermines incentives for organizing collectively. Thus, the optimism of

liberal democracy produces a society that is fundamentally unjust to some and undercuts the original goal of justice.

Perhaps most threatening is the irreversible situation that is created by the optimism of liberal democracy. Optimism creates a situation where the beguiling can take advantage of the naïve. Once those who have achieved power have obtained it, they will be unwilling to relinquish any of the power they have obtained (Niebuhr 1960b). The powerful factions in society will act to maintain their power, and continue the powerlessness of other factions. The gulf between the two groups will widen over time, and more injustice will be enacted upon the powerless. Thus, it will only become harder to remedy this inequity as time progresses. As the powerful classes gain supremacy, they will progress into a more oppressive and unethical class (Niebuhr 1960b). In the final summary, liberal democracy is a theory that is based upon the optimism of humanity because it assumes humanity is rational and thus moral. This optimism leads to a lack of societal controls on individuals. However, the base nature of humanity insures that at least some individuals will take advantage of this situation to exploit others for their own benefit. As the exploiters gain power, they will become even more unethical and unwilling to relinquish power. Thus, the situation will only become increasingly unjust. For Niebuhr, liberal democracy is a system with potential, but which contains fundamental flaws that have resulted in injustice and an insecure government.

Solutions for Liberal Democracy

Niebuhr was aware of the flaw of optimism in liberal democracy. Since he maintained faith in the ability of liberal democracy to achieve justice, and since justice was his overarching goal, Niebuhr sought a method that could repair the flaws of liberal democracy. Ultimately, Niebuhr would argue that religion was capable of countering the structural problems of liberal democracy. Niebuhr argued that religion could solve the flaw of optimism, as well as impart other important values that would allow liberal democracy to achieve the justice its ideals promise. Before discussing the values that Niebuhr believed religion could impart to democracy, it is necessary to discuss which religion Niebuhr would use to improve democracy. Niebuhr favored, without question, a Judeo-Christian approach (Merkley 1975). In fact, Niebuhr consistently maintained that other world religions, such as Eastern religions, did not contain the proper values

or were too 'mystical' to effectively spread the necessary values (Niebuhr 1960a). Additionally, Niebuhr did not consider any one form of Christianity to be perfectly suited to the establishment of a more perfect liberal democracy.

For example, Niebuhr argued that the Catholic Church was too centered on natural law, with its implicit optimism of human nature, and thereby was unsuitable for improving democracy (Niebuhr 1960a). Likewise, Niebuhr asserted that the traditional Protestant approach placed too much emphasis on individualism, which led to the problem of the individual gaining power and wreaking havoc without any type of societal restraint (Niebuhr 1960a). Finally, Niebuhr's approach rejected fundamentalism, both highly emotional and intensely spiritual versions. Niebuhr argued for a religious approach that utilized reason, as a controlling factor against the irrationality and dogmatism of religion (Harland 1960). Niebuhr endorsed a unique Christian approach, which was progressive in tone, subdued, and intellectual (Tracy 1996). Niebuhr's religious values most closely resemble the Protestant Social Gospel movement of the 1920s (Merkley 1975). It is a religious approach that is concerned with assisting society and open to self-criticism. Social gospel combined idealist goals with a realistic approach. Social gospel understands that failures will occur due to human fallibility (Merkley 1975). Niebuhr utilized a Protestant social gospel background, informed by an acceptance of secular ideas of justice to formulate the values which liberal democracy currently lacks.

The most important value which liberal democracy could extract from a modified Protestant approach is an understanding of the depraved nature of humanity. Liberal democracy, while admitting that people are flawed, ultimately assumes that humanity is essentially good. Due to his religious background, Niebuhr saw humanity through a dualistic lens. Niebuhr was a strong advocate of the original sin doctrine, and believed that humanity while capable of good, could also do unspeakable evil (Harland 1960). The rise of fascist regimes from democratic governments, which occurred during Niebuhr's lifetime, adds legitimacy to this conclusion of a base humanity. Niebuhr argued that a modified Protestant approach would indoctrinate people with an understanding of humanity as capable of evil (Niebuhr 1960a). Individuals informed by this approach would understand the flawed nature of humanity. Niebuhr believed that if humanity began to question its own inherent goodness, then measures would be undertaken to protect

society from its own members (Niebuhr 1960a). Furthermore, the religious approach may motivate people to believe in their own faults more intensely. Thus, the defense mechanisms humanity enacts against itself may spread beyond the purely political and into the economic or private spheres as well. Since a truly Protestant democracy would be willing to address the banal nature of humanity, it would be able to design a system that is more impervious to control by evil and self-interested groups. Hence a modified Protestant approach to government and economics would be an important boon to creating a more just society.

While Niebuhr's modified Protestant doctrine is capable of solving his primary complaint with liberal democracy, Niebuhr also believed that his approach would spread other important values to modern liberal democracies. One of the primary values that Niebuhr's Christianity would lend to liberal democracy is a greater degree of respect for the individual. This is not the radical individualism of liberal democracy, which views the individual as atomistic and separate from others. Instead, this conception of the individual moves beyond self-worth and grants worth to other individuals as well. Christianity, as a whole, appreciates "the unique worth of the individual and locates that dignity in the position he holds before God" (Harland 171, 1960). In fact, this sense of the individual's worth before God was one of the root sources of equality in modern times (Niebuhr 1960a). Niebuhr argued that by enhancing the role of Protestantism in society, the ideal of equality would gain more importance. That dedication to equality would lead to greater justice (Harland 1960). Niebuhr argues that by superimposing over society a superior, divine being which views all people as equal, individuals will begin to internalize and act upon equality values themselves. As people gain respect for others in this manner, they will treat each other more civilly and assist each other more often. Therefore, understanding the equality of human beings on a spiritual level would lead to legislation that enhances political, economic, and social equality. Niebuhr firmly believed that his brand of Protestantism would create a more equal, and therefore a more just society.

Another value that Niebuhr desired for his modified Protestant theory to pass to liberal democracy was a greater degree of humility. For most Christian sects, pride "is the very quintessence of sin" (Niebuhr 135, 1960a). Niebuhr's religious approach would emphasize the importance of humility. This emphasis on humility should lead to a more humble populace.

Humility leads to tolerance, which is important because modern democratic societies will also be diverse societies composed of many groups of different people (Niebuhr 1960a). A tolerant society is a more peaceful, less acerbic, and less violent society, which should be more just. In addition, tolerance of others should positively affect the willingness of different groups to assist each other, and engage in productive negotiation in the political arena. Tolerance and humility would reduce the arrogance in a society and may lead those in power to understand the tenuous nature of their opulent lifestyle. Thus, social assistance programs may be more plausible in a more humble nation. Niebuhr argued that tolerance was a core value of his modified Christianity, and that stressing tolerance would lead to a more just society.

An example of the benefits of a respect and tolerance in society can be witnessed through a discussion of economic justice. Niebuhr consistently maintained that economic justice was a vital issue for any society seeking to achieve a more complete justice (Merkley 1975). Niebuhr asserted, “the property issue must...be continually solved within the framework of the democratic process” (Niebuhr 115, 1960). Should the upper classes respect workers as individuals and begin to view their own position humbly, it seems possible that some type of mixed communist and capitalist economy could more easily be established. Thus, working classes would benefit from respect and humility in society, and a greater degree of justice would be conceived. Niebuhr believed that Protestant derived values in society would enable society to begin to achieve these concrete goals.

Finally, Niebuhr believed that the incorporation of his modified Protestant approach would lead to a democracy in which the sense of authority flowed from above. Niebuhr argued that using religion in politics would lead people to the understanding that there is an authority beyond the state. If people believe that there is an authority above government, individuals will not blindly follow the government (Harland 1960). This higher source of guidance provides individuals with the moral strength to critique the government. A government that is under question by an active moral force is a government that is in a position to create greater social justice because people will be more inclined to raise problems in government or society, and thereby address societal concerns. Further, if the higher source was a moral source, than people would be motivated to seek more moral and just goals (Niebuhr 1960a). Additionally, a questioning religious approach

would keep people more involved in government, and participation is necessary for democracy (Dahl 1998). Niebuhr's modified Protestant approach to liberal democracy supplies a crusading spirit that will help ensure that unjust laws are not perpetuated in an unjust society.

Niebuhr asserted that the value of a higher authority was particularly important for liberal democracy to incorporate into its rhetoric. Niebuhr argued that the assumption that a secular government was the highest authority was a situation ripe for tyranny. Niebuhr argued that too much secularism, without religious values, led to moral nihilism and despair (Niebuhr 1960a). The state is unable to fulfill the entire moral and spiritual needs of the individual; the state simply lacks the depth to supply meaning for an individual. If the state is relied on as the sole authority, then a vacuum is created. This vacuum could be filled quickly by a secular religion, such as Nazism. Niebuhr believed that a Christian society would be less susceptible to the guiles of Nazism. A Christian society would have an alternative value system at work, to compete with the secular religion of a fascist government. In fact, he argued that a modified Christian society would be able to identify and mobilize against such a fascist evil (Merkley 1975). The modified Protestant theology of Reinhold Niebuhr provides for a superior authority to the government that can prevent the invasion of authoritarian forces into democratic society.

Ultimately, Niebuhr argued that a modified Protestant theology was necessary to preserve liberal democracy. The introduction of the religious ideas of the evil potential of humanity, respect for others, tolerance, and the introduction of a greater authority could create a more just liberal democratic society. In the end, Niebuhr endorses values that would benefit almost any society. Niebuhr felt that these values would make a society that was more civil, altruistic, willing to enact barriers against self-interest, and capable of intercepting and emasculating tyrannical forces. Niebuhr's desire for civility and a peaceful life is not ridiculous and should be admired. Niebuhr also encompassed pluralist ideas such as diffusion of power, equal access, and compromise (Dye and Zeigler 1978). For Niebuhr, religion is not at odds with liberal democracy. Instead, Protestant tinged religious values enhance current, weakly held democratic values. In Niebuhr's view, the passage of the individual through religious ideals is one method to construct a stronger (and even more democratic) liberal democracy.

Advantages of Religion in Democracy

When Niebuhr proposed a Protestant-derived democratic government, he set forth a plausible and compelling ideology. Niebuhr's approach to liberal democracy contains at least three primary advantages. Niebuhr describes a system that promotes justice, gives moral definition to society, and utilizes an effective method to spread values. To begin, Niebuhr prescribes a system that, if followed, will increase the amount of justice in a society. While Niebuhr only articulated a few values that he believed were necessary for justice, such as balance of power, equality, and open access, it is clear that his Protestant democracy fulfills these goals (Harland 1960). For example, Niebuhr's approach includes an understanding of the base nature of humanity. Comprehension of this issue should lead a society to implement policies that control the amount of power that individuals, because of their imperfect nature, are allowed to obtain and control. Additionally, Niebuhr's approach openly calls for equality among citizens because of the equality of all before God; equality was a value that Niebuhr recognized as necessary in truly just societies (Harland 1960). Through this equal treatment, people are given equal opportunity and equivalent treatment before the law. Also, respect and tolerance for others will help increase the opportunities for all people to be granted access to the decision making process. Thereby, equal access will be granted in Niebuhr's modified democracy. It is without question that if the values Niebuhr targeted as key in his religious democracy were successfully transferred to the populace, a more just society would be created. Niebuhr articulated that his values would create a society which would be more civil, open, and malleable than current liberal democratic governments. While Niebuhr never clearly defined his conception of justice, a society that treats its members fairly and is resistant to tyranny would be a society which has begun to achieve a greater justice.

But Niebuhr's approach was capable of achieving more than its primary goal of creating a more just society. A religious approach to politics could act to give "moral definition and direction to American public life and policy" (Neuhaus 59, 1984). Niebuhr presented a blistering argument against the reliance on reason alone in politics, and its inability to give appropriate guidance to individuals or defense against evils, such as fascism (Niebuhr 1960a; Niebuhr 1977). Niebuhr believed that a wholly secular approach was detrimental to society. Modern society is violent, materialistic, and seemingly unable to address serious social problems from violence in schools to American businesses fleeing to foreign shores. Niebuhr would approach modern social ills as having originated not from structural issues, but because of the inherent moral flaws in

secular and liberal democratic thought, such as too intense of a focus on individualism and private property. If this is the case, by utilizing a Protestant approach, Niebuhr has supplied a potential solution to these societal ills. Niebuhr would impart to society a Protestant based morality that would lead people to move beyond selfish considerations and promote greater social justice. Of course, the idea of an active, overt religion in politics carries dangerous connotations of legislating morality (Neuhaus 1984). Yet, it is important to consider the greater utility. If religion in politics could preserve democracy, promote justice, and create civility, it is necessary to consider the role religion should play in the public sphere. Niebuhr presents a bold challenge to traditional liberal democracy. Niebuhr is bluntly asking: what is more important, personal liberty or the overall health of society? Modern conditions of sweatshops and poverty give weight to Niebuhr's argument that traditional liberal democracy must be challenged with a more religiously moral approach to political life. When considering this it is important to remember that Niebuhr is not calling for a theocracy. Instead, he is advocating retaining current liberal democratic procedures of elections and free discussions, only now informed with his own version of Protestant values. Niebuhr simply views his religious values as tool to preserve democracy, increase justice and civility, and prevent society from self-destructing.

While Protestantism would create a more just and permanent society, there is potential beyond that in Niebuhr's religious liberal democracy. A religious method is also useful not only because of the values that it imparts, but because of how effectively it transmits values. There is very little question that religion effectively transmits moral values (Neuhaus 1984). But religion is also very skillful at spreading political values (Wald 1997). For example, it is argued that one reason the United States labor movement was never strongly communist was because of the influence of the anti-communist Catholic Church among the ethnicities who comprised the majority of the labor unions (Karson 1951). Thus, religion would impart Niebuhr's values, as well as traditional values, of liberal democracy more effectively than secular education. By entrenching these democratic values more deeply in its members, a society could become more democratic. A Christian approach, according to Niebuhr, would be particularly suited for this because it already contains democratic values. For example, Christianity emphasizes the importance of the covenant between humanity and God, an agreement that resembles the social contract basis of liberal democracy (Neuhaus 1984; Niebuhr 1960a). This approach would be

particularly effective in the United States. Not only is the United States a particularly religious nation when compared to other Western societies, but also its roots are also very religious (Wald 1997). After all, among the original settlers of the United States were the religious Puritans. Interestingly, the Puritans also utilized limited democratic methods when selecting the leaders of their churches (Fischer 1989). Thus, religion is a powerful tool for transmitting values, and particularly Protestantism because of the role of the covenant and other democratic values in the Protestant faith.

Niebuhr, in his writings, recommends an approach to democracy that draws heavily from Protestant sources for its moral basis. This approach has the potential to create a more just society. Furthermore, a more religious society may develop into a more civil society, and may also be more successful in transmitting democratic values on to future generations. Due to these benefits, Niebuhr describes an unconventional approach to democracy that must be considered. Niebuhr is not proposing an abstract value system. Instead, he is suggesting that there will be very real material benefits from this shift in position away from traditional liberal democracy to one more informed by his Protestant derived values. The true utility of this position only heightens the strength of the challenge that Niebuhr places against liberal democracy.

Drawbacks of Religion in Democracy

Niebuhr's depiction of a Protestant style democracy that would generate a more just society appears to be nearly flawless and capable of only bestowing benefits on a population. Unfortunately, Niebuhr's approach is not perfect. Niebuhr faces the problems of being ethnocentric, impractical, and subjective. Primary among the drawbacks of Niebuhr's approach is the ethnocentric approach it utilizes. Niebuhr openly admits that he believes only Christianity can fulfill the needs of democratic society (Niebuhr 1960a). Niebuhr openly dismisses other religions as incapable of fulfilling this role. Further, Niebuhr believes that specifically only a Protestant derived ethic can appropriately fulfill the needs of democracy. Thus Niebuhr alienates not only other religions, but also even different strains of Christianity. In addition, a reliance of traditional Christianity could leave women marginalized. Traditional Christian approaches emphasize the role of men in the Bible, and refers to God in the masculine gender (Goldberg 1979). Thus, Niebuhr's approach may not appeal to as many people as he originally conceptualized. This

approach contradicts Niebuhr's own devotion to pluralism and tolerance, values he believed should be among the core values of democracy. Niebuhr displays a lack of sensitivity for other religions and cultures in his bold statements on the superiority of Protestantism. In fact, Niebuhr is actually committing the sin of pride by assuming that Christianity somehow has monopolized all potential Christian values. Plus, Niebuhr may be denying society access to important, alternate values. Niebuhr has presented a situation where it would be difficult to build a diverse society, with true toleration, if everyone was expected to internalize Protestant values. In other words, Niebuhr has designed a system meant to improve a diverse society, yet his solution depends on reducing the amount of diversity in the society. This is an important flaw in Niebuhr's approach. It is necessary to consider other religions, and in particular what they could add to democratic values. In addition, using solely Protestant values would increase the difficulty in spreading democracy if a component of creating a new successful democratic regime involves converting people to a new religion. It is evident that Niebuhr's ethnocentric approach is a flaw, and may prevent his approach from being effective.

While the narrowness of Niebuhr's approach is of concern, perhaps a more fundamental flaw is the difficulty of implementation. Niebuhr never clearly identified any processes that would be used to introduce Protestant-like values into mainstream American culture. Lack of a distinct plan makes it difficult to consider Niebuhr's approach a viable one. Albeit this study was limited, and Niebuhr may have discussed real instrumental plans in other writings. However, none were encountered in this survey. This problem is magnified when the religious nature of Niebuhr's approach is considered. Traditionally, American society is composed of a private and a public sphere. Religion is usually relegated to the private sphere, while government is in the public sphere. Additionally, there has been a tendency to separate state and religion in American political culture. Niebuhr is describing a system where the private becomes public by changing religion's traditional sphere of influence. Establishing a more public religion is not necessarily an improper goal, but it is difficult. It is especially difficult when Niebuhr does not describe a method of implementation. This lack of detail on Niebuhr's part seems to undercut his desire for practical solutions (Stone 1972). A lack of overt solutions may even imply that Niebuhr considered covertly spreading these values. Outright manipulation would be very circumspect, especially in a free, open, and democratic society. It seems questionable whether democracy can be spawned

from an approach that, if covert, appears to be paternalistic. Democratic self-determination seems difficult in a society that attempts to manipulate and care for its citizens like children, be secretly dispensing religion to make individuals better citizens. While Niebuhr may identify a general strategy to improve American society, he does not fully describe the process by which this would occur. This is particularly damaging when Niebuhr's dedication to pragmatic solutions is considered.

The final problem with Niebuhr using his Protestant values in modern society is the subjectivity of the entire undertaking. Niebuhr never provides an accurate measure of justice in society, insisting that it is always relative (Harland 1960). This makes it difficult for a society which incorporates Niebuhr's values to be aware if it is implementing all of Niebuhr's values, or even to the proper extent. Furthermore, by introducing religion into politics, Niebuhr could create a situation where people acted under dogma without clear thought. Thus, Niebuhr could be creating a situation ripe for fanaticism. In this circumstance, it is likely that policies would be implemented which amounted to the government legislating morality and exerting heavy levels of influences over the private lives of individuals. Niebuhr sought to preserve democracy, yet there is a danger in his approach because a reliance on religious values could lead to the end of traditional civil liberties. In this case, the desire to preserve morality would lead to infringement on many individual freedoms, so that non-Christian speech could be silenced or lifestyle choices declared illegal. Niebuhr was aware of this possibility and opposed to dogmatic ideologies; therefore he always argued that reason should be an important part of his Protestant religious values (Niebuhr 1977). Niebuhr was aware that secular reason had divulged important truths and could "be an instrument of justice" (Niebuhr 72, 1960a). Furthermore, Niebuhr was cognizant that religious movements had carried out injustice in the past, such as the Crusades, the Inquisition, or the Salem witch trials (Harland 1960). So Niebuhr was certain to maintain that reason would still be a factor in his new democratic values, only now reason would be supplemented with spiritual values. Of course, whether or not reason is capable of justice in this scenario should be questionable, since rationality was insufficient in preserving justice the past (Niebuhr 1960b). Nonetheless, while there is a problem with the subjective, dogmatic use of religion in society, Niebuhr is able to provide at least a minimal check by using rationality to counter fanaticism. While the question of correct implementation is a question for any ideology, Niebuhr only barely suggests a barometer

by which a society can determine if its religious democracy is creating justice. Thus, Niebuhr has created a situation where justice is still difficult to measure, and fanaticism may actually be more likely. This is a distinct problem with his approach.

Ultimately, Niebuhr faces a number of problems in his approach because he was ethnocentric, vague, and very subjective. These problems may undermine his ability to spread his Protestant values throughout society and government, and thus create a more just society. Niebuhr has, apparently, left this part of his project for individuals to solve in their own manner. Niebuhr has supplied the basic goals and values that would ensure greater social justice; he has given society a basic blueprint. The responsibility of society is to critique this viewpoint, improve upon it, and utilize it in a manner appropriate to their situation in order to generate a greater deal of social justice in their particular social context.

Final Remarks

When considering Reinhold Niebuhr and his argument that a religiously informed democracy would become a more just one it immediately becomes clear how dedicated Niebuhr was to the idea of justice. Justice was very important to Niebuhr, because of his understanding that justice was born from religion and the Cross (Harland 1960). Justice, then, was more than a social good; justice was partial fulfillment of a religious ideal and thus of great importance. In response to this primacy of justice, Niebuhr presented an alternate value system which he believed was capable of transforming political culture into one which was not only more just, but more secure for just systems as well. In addition, the pragmatic aspect of Niebuhr is evident in his argument of justice improved through Protestantism. Niebuhr believed that religion would be an effective and lasting way to spread values. So he suggested utilizing religion to transfer political values because he believed it was a viable solution.

This pragmatic stance is particularly important when the era in which Niebuhr wrote in is considered. Niebuhr wrote his works on justice and democracy following the Second World War and during the Cold War (Merkley 1975). Niebuhr viewed the Soviet Union as an imperialistic threat, and knew that the Communist Party of the United States answered to the Soviet Union (Niebuhr 1977; Merkley 1975). During the Cold War there were Soviet and American spies

reporting to the Russian government. Niebuhr would have been aware of this threat (Haynes 1996). In addition, Niebuhr was aware of the atrocities of Stalin's government (Merkley 1975). Thus, Niebuhr prescribes a method that he believes will quickly and completely indoctrinate political values, and therefore hopefully help prevent the spread of Communism. In this context, it is understandable why Niebuhr would consider realigning the private to the public sphere, in order to preserve a better social order. Niebuhr had a true and legitimate fear of Soviet imperialism. Niebuhr also displayed pragmatism through his willingness to accept justice and not love as his guiding force. Another example of his pragmatic side was his decision to maintain reason as a part of his value system in order to prevent the dogmatic aspects of religion from becoming too influential. Thus, when examining Niebuhr's argument that his Protestant values should become a part of liberal democratic values, it is possible to witness Niebuhr's commitment to justice as well as his pragmatic nature.

While it is obvious from this examination that Niebuhr was willing to be flexible and dedicated to justice, the actual effectiveness of his approach is a question of greater concern. Niebuhr's argument that religious values should be utilized in public policy are compelling, and seem as if they may be capable of creating a better society. But there are criticisms that assert that religion is not always an effective tool to control behavior (Browne 1974). Thus, Niebuhr's values may not even have their intended effect. An issue of equal concern is the lack of actual recommendations made by Niebuhr to introduce these values into society. Furthermore, the ethnocentric approach of Niebuhr is highly contentious. Placing religious values strongly in the public sphere is difficult, particularly since Niebuhr chooses the single religion and the only values that he believes must be used to save society. This is an alienating approach, and brings into the question the justice and practicality of Niebuhr's doctrine. These are serious flaws, yet the benefits of Niebuhr's approach could be so great it is still necessary to consider using religion to improve public life.

In fact, the questions Niebuhr proposed are still very relevant today. As mentioned previously, President Bush's has put forth initiatives to allow religious organizations to compete directly with other services for federal assistance. Under this new plan, churches would directly provide services, and a separate charitable foundation would no longer be necessary. The implications

seem relatively clear: the federal government will be supporting certain church-based social programs, such as drug abuse counseling and poverty assistance (Compassionate... 2001). Such a program raises a number of questions, among them the problematic situation of the state endorsing some religions over others by choosing which churches receive funds, further entangling church-state relations, as well as the problem of churches potentially being placed under federal guidelines (Rosen 2001). Yet, this approach may also have benefits. For example, it is argued that churches are less bureaucratic and more cost effective. Plus, anecdotal evidence indicated that social programs are more effective when mixed with religious content (“Compassionate Conservatism” 2001). For example, drug abuse programs with a religious tone may be more effective because they impart strength and inspiration. This may be particularly effective in the United States, due to the strong religious culture in this nation. Hence, it is clear that the questions Niebuhr asked decades ago are still relevant today. Essentially, it is necessary to ponder whether it is acceptable to further entangle church-state relations, in order to serve the greater social good. There is not a simply answer to this question, but it is necessary to consider the implications, both positive and negative, and attempt to derive a compromise which promotes the collective good without overly sacrificing the integrity of the church-state split.

In this vein, it is worthwhile to consider solutions that are able to incorporate religious values without any legal entanglements. A more feasible approach, which would be more plausible in a society which attempts to separate church and state, is one in which churches are mobilized towards civic goals. In other words, churches are co-opted to discuss how religious values relate to civic values such as toleration, covenants, or civic responsibility. All religions can be targeted, and there could be attempts to label civic values similar to the ones Niebuhr identified in Protestantism as necessary for democracy. This is without a doubt a difficult process: to reach all of these churches, extract the proper values, and convince church leaders to utilize religious services to enhance political values. This would be similar to the political role played by the African-American church, which often encourages voter registration, voting, as well as providing politicians an opportunity to address the congregation and inform worshippers (Harris 1995). The Christian Coalition has also used a similar bottom to top flow of power to gain influence with their particular religious values. In addition, unlike Niebuhr, this approach would better maintain the split between the secular and the religious. The state would not be expected to favor one

approach, instead religious institutions would simply be heightening the political as well as spiritual ethics of their congregations. This approach, which emphasizes the role the citizens play in controlling the tone of government policy, is also beneficial because it involves individuals actively utilizing the democratic process. Niebuhr would approve of this because an active democracy is one that is secure and more likely to address social problems. There are difficulties with this approach, but it seems to be an approach that is less alienating than Niebuhr's method.

However, using churches as informal governmental information centers does not address the problem of churches providing social services, which the Bush plan encompasses. That is a fault: that with the African-American church model, the religious community is less able to serve the population with social welfare benefits. But using churches as informal civic gathering points avoids the legal issues of Bush's plan raises. The potential benefits of the Bush plan should not be ignored, however, but should be refined in an on-going dialogue to attempt to define an acceptable way to further empower churches to attack social ills. It is necessary to maintain flexibility when addressing modern social problems and not shut down possible solutions. It is necessary to address these problems, while preserving out liberty, and the balance between the two can be fragile. Niebuhr provides one approach that attempts to balance the two. Until that balance is perfected, however, a split between church-state is most likely preferred for both sides. In the end, Niebuhr introduced a unique approach to politics. In many ways, Niebuhr's move away from the rational to the more spiritual is an illiberal approach. Yet, his overall goal is still a liberal democracy; Niebuhr is just considering a different route that utilizes religion. Niebuhr argued that religion should be used not to legislate morality, but instead to create a more just society. It is necessary to consider this model seriously, because of the potential benefits. While there are problems with Niebuhr's methods, he is still able to provide an outlook which could further thinking about the role of religion and politics, and the ability of the two to interact and generate a more just society.

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