

**A critical appraisal of the link between social justice and democracy in  
the political thought of Reinhold Niebuhr**

**by**

**Marlie Holtzhausen**

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## DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

**Full name of student:** Marlie Holtzhausen

**Student number:** 29148512

**Degree/Qualification:** MA Political Science

**Title of dissertation:** A critical appraisal of the link between social justice and democracy in the political thought of Reinhold Niebuhr

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**Date:** .....

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## ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine why Niebuhr viewed democracy as a necessary and valuable instrument for the promotion of greater social justice. His democratic views flow logically from his reflections on human nature and the pursuit of greater justice within societies.

In the course of this study, Niebuhr's theological ideas are considered as far as it provides key insights from which he extrapolates his political thinking. Niebuhr's conception of human nature depicts humans as capable of being both caring of others but also as self-interested seeking power and glory. This also has implications for the behaviour of groups within societies. Niebuhr tries to find some political means to address especially the dangers of group interest and domination. He argues that a need for political organisation exists that provide the necessary protection against domination and exploitation of some groups over others, but also as force that promotes equilibrium of power between competing groups within society. Niebuhr thus searches for a system of government that would deal more appropriately with the problems of freedom and order within societies and found democracy as appropriate instrument.

Ultimately, Niebuhr argues that democracy is a valuable form and necessary instrument in the organisation of society because it does justice to the essentially free nature of humans, but also takes seriously the dangers of human self-interest. Democracy is also capable of absorbing and advancing many different and diverse views, as well as to readjust different claims in the promotion of the welfare of societies. He supported liberal democratic ideals but realised that the government has a vital role to play and he advocated for government involvement in the promotion of social welfare, which alludes to important social democratic principles. His view on government is always informed by his theological convictions and he thus aims to impart Christian values into the organisation of society so as to promote greater levels of justice throughout society.

Keywords: Reinhold Niebuhr, democracy, social justice, human nature

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 Introduction.....	1
1.2 Context of the research .....	2
1.3 Literature overview .....	7
1.3.1 Niebuhr’s theology and his views on human nature .....	7
1.3.2 Niebuhr on justice: his social and political thought .....	9
1.4 Formulation and demarcation of the research problem .....	14
1.5 Research design and methodology.....	14
1.6 Structure of the research .....	15
<b>CHAPTER 2: REINHOLD NIEBUHR ON HUMAN NATURE, JUSTICE AND SOCIAL JUSTICE .....</b>	<b>17</b>
2.1 Introduction.....	17
2.2 Different conceptualisations of human nature – Niebuhr in the larger discourse.....	18
2.3 Alternative positions on human nature .....	21
2.4 Human freedom and finiteness: Niebuhr’s paradoxical position on human nature.....	26
2.5 The problem of sin .....	31
2.6 The possibilities and the limits of history according to Niebuhr .....	33
2.7 Grappling with the meaning of justice and social justice .....	36
2.7.1 Virtue.....	39
2.7.2 Welfare .....	40
2.7.3 Freedom and social equality.....	42
2.8 Niebuhr’s conception of justice and social justice - love in realisable action .....	45
2.8.1 Love in Niebuhr’s ethical analysis – <i>agape</i> .....	45
2.8.2 Niebuhr’s link between <i>agape</i> and justice .....	48
2.8.3 Transcendent principles of justice and organising societies .....	52
2.9 Conclusion .....	55

## **CHAPTER 3: ORDERING SOCIETY: NIEBUHR'S CHRISTIAN REALISM.....58**

3.1 Introduction.....	58
3.2 Niebuhr's theory in practice: his social and political involvements and its influence on his political thought.....	59
3.3 Niebuhr's appraisal of modern approaches to social order.....	66
3.3.1 The sentimentality of liberalism and the utopianism of Marxism .....	66
3.3.1.1 <i>Optimism of the first type: Liberalism</i> .....	67
3.3.1.2 <i>Optimism of the second type: Marxism</i> .....	74
3.3.1.3 <i>Liberals and Marxists - birds of a feather</i> .....	78
3.3.2 Pessimism.....	80
3.4 Niebuhr's synthesis – Christian Realism .....	86
3.5 Conclusion .....	93

## **CHAPTER 4: NIEBUHR'S UNDERSTANDING OF DEMOCRACY AS INSTRUMENT AND PARTIAL SOLUTION FOR THE PROMOTION OF SOCIAL JUSTICE .....96**

4.1 Introduction.....	96
4.2 Niebuhr as democrat .....	97
4.3 Niebuhr, liberal culture and liberal democracy.....	98
4.4 Niebuhr's criticism of liberal values and liberal democracy .....	99
4.4.1 Cultural and religious pluralism.....	102
4.4.2 Ethnic and race relations .....	103
4.4.3 Economic challenges.....	103
4.5 Niebuhr on the necessity, task, and structure of democracy.....	105
4.5.1 The need for democracy.....	107
4.5.2 The task of democracy .....	111
4.5.3 The structure of democracy.....	115
4.6 Overview of Niebuhr's view of democracy.....	121
4.7 Reflections on Niebuhr's approach.....	122
4.8 Conclusion .....	128

<b>CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION.....</b>	<b>131</b>
Conclusion .....	131
 <b>BIBLIOGRAPHY.....</b>	 <b>145</b>

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Introduction

Karl Paul Reinhold Niebuhr (1892–1971) is glowingly referred to as “the leading American political philosopher, moralist, and theologian of his day” (Stone 1972: 8). This attribution signifies his contribution to the fields of political science, social theory, philosophy, and theology. Despite being a clergyman and theologian by profession, his political thought had a great impact on the secular world. Notwithstanding its significance during the middle of the twentieth century, his name and thought gradually faded from the public stage during the latter part of the twentieth century.

Nevertheless, the early twenty-first century seemingly witnessed a revival of his prominence, especially in the United States of America (USA). By way of illustration, during an interview with New York Times columnist David Brooks (2007), the then Senator and future US President Barack Obama spoke of his admiration for Reinhold Niebuhr. This sparked some public debate on the relevance of Niebuhr in the twenty-first century (see Blake 2010; Carlson 2013; Felice 2010; Lovin 2007; Rice 2009; Sitman 2012; The Economist 2011; Tippett 2009). It also signalled a rapid renewal of interest that broadly focused on the enduring relevance of Niebuhr as a religious thinker and public intellectual. In addition, it highlighted his theocentric promotion of social justice through democracy in a secular world, and his continuing influence on the understanding of social justice, broader society, politics, and history (Rice 2009: xi).

Following on from this surge in interest, this study aims to examine the reasons for Niebuhr’s view that democracy is a valuable instrument in the promotion of greater social justice. His democratic views will be analysed in light of his practical experiences, as well as in the manner in which it follows logically from his deep, wide-ranging, and realistic reflections on human nature and the pursuit of greater justice within societies.



Niebuhr's theological understanding of human nature and his personal convictions were the driving force behind his pursuit to find a political system that would promote greater social justice within societies. Niebuhr's overall thought and writings will be examined to explain why he found democracy to be both a valuable and necessary instrument, as well as an appropriate ordering framework in which social justice could flourish.

## 1.2 Context of the research

Niebuhr's views thus continued to resonate in the twenty-first century, in particular his views on social justice. This allurements can greatly be attributed to the fact that he never approached his subject-matter – be it sin, poverty, oppression, or democracy – merely as academic concerns, but rather as always having deeply practical and even personal concern. Therefore, to understand and to discuss Niebuhr's philosophy, and specifically his use of theology in his social writings, some background to his personal and professional life is pertinent.

Niebuhr's parents were German immigrants to the USA, which is where he was born in 1892. His faith and intellectual development were greatly influenced by his German-Lutheran ancestry, the Anglo-Saxon world, and “the values of the American heartland” (Stone 1972: 17).

Niebuhr served as a Lutheran minister in Detroit from 1915 and in 1928 he became a faculty member at the Union Theological Seminary in New York, while also lecturing at many universities and colleges throughout the US. Early in his career, he also became deeply involved in a variety of political causes, such as activist efforts against racism and his support for organised labour. His lifelong political engagement furthermore expressed itself in the co-founding of the Fellowship of Social Christians in 1930, and the establishment of a number of journals during the 1930s and 1940s, such as *Christianity and Society* and *Christianity and Crisis*. He formed the United Christian Council for Democracy, and helped to establish the Delta Cooperative Farm in Hillhouse,

Mississippi, both of which were key projects of the Fellowship of Socialist Christians (Fox 1985: 176). In 1941 he helped to establish the Union for Democratic Action (UDA), which became a secure political home for Niebuhr (Fox 1985: 197). By 1944, he had become a household name due to all his involvements, especially as a writer and an advisor in international politics most notably during and then also after World War II.

Niebuhr's presence in politics was particularly evident in New York (Fox 1985: 219). In 1944, he founded the Liberal Party in New York State and also became an advisor to the state Department. After World War II he helped to shape the American response to the emerging Cold War. He contributed to the establishment of the liberal group called Americans for Democratic Action in 1949, and his friendships with Eleanor Roosevelt and Hubert Humphrey allowed him to influence American public policy. In 1964, President Lyndon Johnson awarded Niebuhr with the Medal of Freedom for his life's work (Von Dehsen 1999: 143). It was felt that through his theological philosophy he made great contributions to secular political wisdom and moral responsibility (Patterson 1977: 17). Although he never claimed to be a professional theologian, Niebuhr became known as one of the most influential American theologians of the twentieth century. More so, he was recognised as a pastor, teacher, prolific writer and thinker, activist scholar, prophetic voice, public figure, and an intellectual politician. He was also a prominent public speaker and had a special rapport with students (Rasmussen 1989: 1).

Essentially, Niebuhr used resources from Christianity and the biblical idea of original sin to provide a deep-rooted understanding of the human situation. Through this defence and justification of the Christian faith, he wanted to show people how it could realistically interpret and deal with modern society and its problems. His polemic against both the secular world as well as the church and the ecclesiastical community, was based on a Christian theological perspective of the Bible known as Christian Realism (Patterson 1977: 15). Christian Realism is a term closely associated with Niebuhr, and often exclusively identified with his thought (Lovin 1995: i). For Niebuhr the Christian faith was not simply a set of ideas and opinions. Instead, it represented a Christian understanding of human nature through which he attempted to address and to assess

political choices and current issues. It was through this Christian understanding that he acknowledged the high stature of humans, while still taking a serious view of evil (Lovin 1995: 3).

Even though Niebuhr's reputation as a social and political philosopher surpassed his reputation as theologian, his theology always remained the "controlling framework [for his] interpretation of collective human action in history" (Rasmussen 1989: 213). Niebuhr studied at two Lutheran schools before completing his Bachelor of Divinity degree at Yale Divinity School in 1914. It was during his time at Yale that he was swayed by liberal theology. Liberal theology emphasises the human spirit, believing that ignorance and the natural impulse of humans are the causes of sin. It also holds an optimistic view of history and human progress in overcoming evil in the world. This liberal stance included studying the Bible both critically and scientifically to analyse contemporary social conditions; embracing religious optimism, individualism, and categories of evolution; and emphasising ethics, tolerance, and the humanity of Jesus (Bingham 1993: 84; Patterson 1977: 21).

Niebuhr's exposure to the detrimental effects of capitalism on people's lives from 1915 when he became a pastor at the Bethel Evangelic Church in Detroit, led to significant changes in his thinking away from his early liberal focus. He began to criticise, and later reject, liberalism whilst embracing some of the ideas of Marxism. He also did not feel that Christian orthodoxy was sufficiently addressing the social injustices, since it emphasised humans' eternal destiny without focusing enough on their present conditions (Patterson 1977: 29).

Niebuhr's politics proved remarkably resistant to labels such as 'left wing' or 'right wing', for his ideas and actions did not conform to conventional understandings or norms of such political categories. His views also changed and shifted over time. In the 1920s he was a pacifist, but in the 1930s this shifted towards a neo-orthodox realist view that criticised liberal theology, focusing instead on human sinfulness, God's sovereignty and grace, and the importance of revelation through scripture. In the 1940s, a further

deepening of his realist views occurred in which he expressed more clearly his Christian Realism (Patterson 1977: 17). When considering all the changes and shifts in Niebuhr's views it is clear that it is not possible to simply apply a category such as liberal or socialist to him, since he agree and yet contradict different views at the same time. He is however not incoherent because of the significant changes in his thinking, but when his views are carefully considered it is clear that he challenges many settled categories of his time to find different and better solutions to the challenges prevalent within society.

Throughout, Niebuhr focused on what was happening in the social and political world around him. His questions were of a political and ethical nature, and his main concern remained with the achievement of greater social justice within societies. His focus was, however, not only on social and political reform: it went beyond that to the understanding of human nature and the character of history, all of which emanated from his theological writings (see Niebuhr 1956; 1996a & 1996b). As his thinking developed and changed, his analysis also considered the possible ways in which to organise modern societies. This ultimately led to an appreciation of democracy as offering the most appropriate ordering framework in which justice could flourish (Niebuhr 1947: 1).

Both his social and political thought and expression also extended to US international relations. As a staunch anti-communist, he supported US intervention in World War II; however, he was opposed to US military intervention in Vietnam. Again, his theological understanding of human nature played an important role in his approach to international politics. This point is illustrated by the fact that he not only disagreed with both Marxism and communism, but also with the American liberal ordering of society and its conduct as superpower beyond its borders. He believed that all of their assumptions about human nature were flawed, by failing to understand the inherent paradoxical nature of humans as finite yet free, which causes anxiety in humans and ultimately leads to sin. These wrong assumptions, he believed, will only lead to further exploitation and injustices among different groups and nations, regardless of the way in which they tried to order society (see Niebuhr 1947: 153-190). He was concerned with the dilemmas and the consequences the US faced due to its status as a superpower. He felt that the dangers of the US as a

superpower could only be cured with a better understanding that evil choices happen due to humans' wrong use of their unique capacities inherent in human nature (Patterson 1977: 51 & Sims 1995).

This study will not aim to explain or to elaborate on his work on international relations, since this has been done extensively. *Reinhold Niebuhr and the Issues of our Time* (1986) is an example of such a compilation of writings on Niebuhr's international politics by authors famously known for this, such as Fox, Gustafson, Hampson, Ward, Preston, Harries, Childress, Gilkey, and Hall. This study, moreover, does not aim to critically appraise the coherence of Niebuhr's theology per se, but will consider it insofar as it provides some of the key insights from which Niebuhr extrapolates his political thinking.

Throughout this study, it will become evident that both Niebuhr's experiences and his theology inform his view on democracy. Despite living in a liberal democratic society that promoted individual freedom, Niebuhr observed the dominance of a small group of capitalists over other groups within society. This exploitation and the high levels of inequalities prevalent in society disturbed him. Within this context and based on his theological understanding of human nature, he searched for better ways to organise society that would promote everyone's well-being and human freedom, but also consider the dangers of human self-interest.

Niebuhr's theology and understanding of human nature permeated his political and social ideas in the manner in which it influenced his desire for greater social justice. He realised that liberal democracy was problematic, yet he still found democracy to be both instrumental and valuable in light of his views on human nature, as well as being a solution to the prevalent injustices within society. Social justice invariably relates to the formal institutions and processes within society. It is here that he argues that democracy is a "permanently valid form of social and political organisation" (Niebuhr 1947: 3). The main concern of this study is to trace and to appraise the internal logic of Niebuhr's regard for democracy as an appropriate ordering of a state aimed at social justice, in spite of his critique of the assumptions undergirding a liberal social order,

### 1.3 Literature overview

The broad context of this study is the writings of Reinhold Niebuhr. This literature review serves to provide an overview of the existing primary and secondary literature on theologian and political philosopher Reinhold Niebuhr as it relates to the theme of this study.

Concerning the actual writings of Niebuhr, we are faced with a large body of work that range from the scholarly to the popular; from intimate theological reflection to broad-ranging comments on international affairs; and from brief essays to voluminous monographs.

The secondary literature on Niebuhr ranges from interpretative biographies such as those authored by Bingham (1993), Fox (1985) and Sims (1995), to a wide variety of works focusing on the explanation and the assessment of his theological, social, and political views and commitments. When considering Niebuhr's own writings as well as these secondary works, it is helpful to consider them in two categories, namely: (i) his theology and broader themes on human nature; and (ii) his social and political thought.

#### 1.3.1 Niebuhr's theology and his views on human nature

Reinhold Niebuhr's theology has always been central to his understanding and his views on justice and how society should be ordered. His theology, in turn, was influenced by social and political experiences that shaped it into a philosophical perspective, which he called Christian Realism. As was indicated earlier, Niebuhr started this journey as a liberal theologian – a position clearly reflected in his earlier writings such as *Does Civilization Need Religion* (1927). His theology gradually matured from the 1920s into the 1930s. His own writings in the 1930s, such as *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932), *The Contribution of Religion to Social Work* (1932), *The Reflection of the End of an Era* (1934), *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (1935), and *Beyond Tragedy* (1937), focused on his views on ethics, history, society, and politics. Nevertheless, his theological

insights from these writings led to his more systematic work, which culminated during the 1940s in the two volumes of *The Nature and Destiny of Man: Human Nature* (1941) and *The Nature and Destiny of Man: Human Destiny* (1943), as well as in *Faith and History* (1949). The secondary literature refers to *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (1941 & 1943) as Niebuhr's most important and mature theological works (Brown 1986; Gilkey 2001; Malotky 2003; Patterson 1977; Rasmussen 1989; Weber 2002). Patterson (1977:41) specifically refers to these works as Niebuhr's theological masterpieces in *Makers of the Modern Theological Mind* (1977).

When considering the secondary literature, we are confronted by a great variety. In *The Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr*, Harland (1960) deals extensively with the theology of Niebuhr and explains Niebuhr's conceptions of the self and sin, justice, love, science, man, and freedom.

Gilkey (2001), Patterson (1977), Rasmussen (1989), and Sims (1995) highlight the important changes in Niebuhr's theological writings. These secondary sources provide a clear indication of the changes that occurred in Niebuhr's thinking, due to his deeper understanding of the problem of human nature, which liberals in his view, inadequately understand.

Patterson (1977) also highlights that Niebuhr did not add many new insights to his theology from the late 1940s; instead, he continually restated his theology with a further appreciation of the resources of the Christian faith. Nevertheless, his increasing focus on international politics (especially during and after World War II) greatly influenced Niebuhr and changed the way in which he interpreted his theology. An example of this influence can be found in *Irony of American History* (1952), where Niebuhr clearly moved away from dogmatic use of theological terminology such as those deployed in *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (1941 & 1943).

A number of prominent scholars challenge Niebuhr's theology and understanding of human nature. Burt (1956: 356) and Ramsey (1956:79) argue in *Reinhold Niebuhr: His*

*Religious, Social, and Political Thought* (1956) that Niebuhr himself offers us a limited perspective on human nature because of his particularly Christian view. Tillich (1956: 36) is critical of the lack of rigour and clarity in his theology. McCann assesses that critics such as William Frankena view Niebuhr's conception of Christian love as imprecise, whereas John Howard, a theological ethicist, objects to the "basic strategy of Niebuhr's Christian realism" (McCann 1980: 28). Niebuhr (1947: xii & 1996a: 26) would counter that the resources in the Christian faith present us with both a coherent and a sufficient understanding and explanation of human nature.

When considering the above criticisms, it must be borne in mind that Niebuhr was never interested in developing an elaborate theological system; instead, his theology always sought practical ends (see Bingham 1993; Fox 1985; Gilkey 2001; Harland 1960; Stone 1972). In *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social, and Political Thought* (1956), Bennett (1956: 50) argues that Niebuhr wanted to bring new solutions to societal problems by "clearing away the idealistic and utopian illusions which have flourished among religious liberals and secular intellectuals". In addition, "He tried to reconcile an 'apparently' mutually exclusive absolute Christian ethic (agape) with a relative social ethic (justice). In combining theology and social ethics he brought theological ethics into the social arena" (Patterson 1977: 17).

### **1.3.2 Niebuhr on justice: his social and political thought**

As explained earlier, Niebuhr's social and political thinking changed significantly due to his social and political experiences. His first major work, *Does Civilization Need Religion* (1927), was a response to his experience of social injustice in Detroit and is where his liberal views started to change significantly. The first and foremost expression of Niebuhr's political philosophy culminated in *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932), in which he launched a critical attack on theological and political liberalism. In this work, he tried to realistically analyse the problems of human society by specifically contrasting the behaviour of individuals and groups, their selfishness, and the importance of power and justice within the ordering of society.



Niebuhr (1947; 1996a & 1996b) evaluates different approaches and perspectives to explain human nature as it relates to the organisation of society. He uses and contrasts, for example, the perspectives of liberal political thinkers such as John Locke (1632-1704) with the approaches of Niccolo Machiavelli (1469-1527) and Thomas Hobbes (1588-1676). Theologians such as Martin Luther, and Christian political thinker Saint Augustine of Hippo significantly shaped and influenced Niebuhr's views. These men were also Church Fathers and Protestant Reformers who made a significant contribution to the inquiry into the understanding of human nature and societies from a religious, and more specifically, a Christian perspective.

In Niebuhr's quest of organising societies more justly, he places the Christian understanding of self-sacrificing love (also known as *agape*), in a unique relationship with justice as ordering principle for society. In the secondary literature, *Justice: What is the Right Thing to do?*, Sandel (2010) provides a comprehensive explanation of the different secular views on justice and social justice, including justice as virtue; justice as welfare; and justice as freedom and social equality. These understandings of justice are explained in this study to compare and to situate Niebuhr within these various debates. It is particularly in *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (1935) and in *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (1941 & 1943) where Niebuhr provides his biblical perspective on justice, specifically the manner in which his theological conception of love relates to justice and the promotion of greater social justice within the political organisation of society.

Although many scholars admire Niebuhr for his understanding of human nature and how he applied this knowledge to society and human interaction, in *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social, and Political Thought* (1956), authors such as Emil Brunner criticise Niebuhr's lack of clarity on conceptualising and explaining justice. These authors imply that although Niebuhr provides an elaborate and general explanation on the reasons and the means by which to order society, it never leads to concrete actions to bring about desired changes within society. Notwithstanding, Dietrichson (1957: 422) and Katz (1957: 1024) agree with John Wolf (1956: 230) when he highlights that Niebuhr's broad

understanding of Western cultural history and the ordering of society added value to these generalisations about justice, because generalisations often hold guiding truth to them. Furthermore, Callen (2001: 1) and Malotky (2003: 120), who would agree that Niebuhr did not provide a clear definition of justice because he saw it as a relative term in history, argue that Niebuhr did explain and indicate what he meant with justice as it relates to the distribution of power within societies. A large body of literature, such as Bingham (1993), Callen (2001), Gilkey 2001, Harland (1960), Lovin (1995), Patterson (1977), Rasmussen (1989), and Rice (1993 & 2013), assert that Niebuhr does provide significant insight as to the core characteristics of justice in society and how to actualise it.

Niebuhr's political philosophy in *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932) was later elaborated on in writings such as *Reflections on the End of an Era* (1934) and *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (1935). In the mid-1930s, he became even more convinced that Christian social responsibility required more action. This deepening in thought clearly reflected in *Beyond Tragedy: Essays on the Christian Interpretation of History* (1937), *Christianity and Power Politics* (1940), and *The Irony of American History* (1952).

Niebuhr's health began to deteriorate during the 1950s, but he still wrote another eleven books in his lifetime, of which *Christian Realism and Political Problems* (1953), *The Self and the Dramas of History* (1955), and *The Structure of Nations and Empires* (1959), still constitute major statements of his views (Scott 1975).

Within the secondary literature, including Harland (1960), Kegley and Bretall (1956), Sims (1995), and Stone (1972), all these meanderings in Niebuhr's social and political thought are divided into a number of phases. This can be summarised as the following: (i) Niebuhr the liberal in his earlier years; (ii) Niebuhr's criticism of liberalism and the adoption of some Marxist ideas; (iii) Niebuhr's greater focus on Christian realism; and finally (iv) Niebuhr as a more conservative and realistic liberal. In his biography of Niebuhr, Fox (1985) contextualises and gives a comprehensive depiction of Niebuhr and

the way in which he viewed and redefined liberalism. Fox emphasises the extraordinary role and influence of Niebuhr as philosopher in the American approach to the world, as well as his ability to use his theological insights to shape, explain, and understand social and political action. Nevertheless, Fox does not shy away from being critical in areas where Niebuhr oversimplifies or when some of his work lacks quality. In Fox's account of Niebuhr, he clearly shows Niebuhr's attempts in reconciling his faith with his politics.

Throughout Niebuhr's career, it was important for him to build a realistic political faith that would guarantee greater justice within society (Fox 1976: 248). In the early 1930s, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932) was one of his first works where he tried to advance Marxist views and ideas of a transformed liberal faith. His Marxist and liberal ideas changed during the 1930s and 1940s, especially in the context of war, Nazism, communism, and utopian liberalism. Notwithstanding, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* shaped Niebuhr's views on the individual and on human interaction within groups, in particular how a group's self-interest devalues the importance of other groups. Even though this was still part of his earlier work, it started to shape his thinking on how to order society more justly. Throughout the 1930s, he tried to find the best way of ordering society by evaluating the possible alternatives, but ultimately concluded that democracy was the best ordering framework in which justice could flourish. He maintained that democracy appreciates the importance of keeping governmental power in check, because it understands human nature and the dangers of trusting people with the power to rule over others (Niebuhr 1947: xii).

This line of argument is evident in Niebuhr's major treatise on democratic political theory, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (1944). In this work, he explores what he believed to be a problem with modern political theories and their understanding of the ordering of society; as well as the resources required in this regard. In Niebuhr's famous quote, "Man's<sup>1</sup> capacity for justice makes democracy possible, but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary" (Niebuhr 1947: xi), he

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<sup>1</sup> Niebuhr used the term 'man' throughout his writings. It was never his intention to use it to exclude the female gender. For him it was a signifier of humanity as a whole.

emphasises that one cannot be too optimistic or too pessimistic about humans. Having a better understanding of human nature meant that a society could be ordered in a more just way – he believed that the Christian realist perspective provided the right resources for this. He increasingly started defending democracy because of its potential in ensuring justice and order within society.

The secondary literature on Niebuhr's thinking does not discuss his views on democracy extensively. Some authors only mention it, whereas others discuss these ideas in a chapter or part of a chapter. These include authors such as Durkin (1989) and Stone (1972) who mention Niebuhr's ideas on democracy, but only in the context of World War II and American policies and actions during this time. Patterson (1977) does reflect on and describe Niebuhr's view on democracy, but he focuses on its relevance to international politics and foreign policy. Nevertheless, some of the literature deals directly with Niebuhr's views on democracy as it relates to his social ethics, particularly social justice and his quest for finding the best way of ordering society more justly (see Bingham 1993; Callen 2001; Fox 1976; Gilkey 2001, Harland 1960, Lovin 1995; Rice 1993 & 2013).

The existing literature on Niebuhr's views on democracy is thus limited, because democracy was never the central focus of his thought, but rather a natural 'outflow' from his conceptualisations of his theology and general political thought. His ideas on international politics had received far more attention because he was so vocal about it during a time when it had great relevance to Americans and their foreign policies.

In this research, Niebuhr's defence of democracy in creating a more just society will be appraised. The basis for this defence begs clarification and assessment. In this appraisal the focus will be on his primary works, especially *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (1941 & 1943), *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932), and *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (1935). These sources are some of his most comprehensive works and directly address the topic of this research. Although democracy was never a central focus in these works, it did feature in his theological, as well as his social and political views on justice.

These broader views clearly had democratic implications for Niebuhr. In addition to these three sources, the research will also largely make use of *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (1944) as it directly correlates with his views on democracy.

#### **1.4 Formulation and demarcation of the research problem**

The primary research question of this study can be stated as follows: why did Niebuhr view democracy as the most appropriate ordering framework in which social justice could flourish?

A number of subsidiary questions emanate from this primary question:

- What is the view of politics and government in the thought of Niebuhr?
- Was Niebuhr's understanding of and support for democracy the product of his exposure to the American understanding of politics, or a culminating political expression of his theological anthropology?
- Did Niebuhr regard democracy as necessary, or even indispensable, in the attainment of justice?
- Does Niebuhr present us with a distinctively Christian understanding of democracy, and if not, what existing model of democracy best encapsulates his understanding thereof?

This study will demonstrate Niebuhr's view on democracy as being a necessary instrument for the promotion of social justice.

#### **1.5 Research design and methodology**

This study is a critical literature study within the discipline of Political Science. It will be in the form of a discursive assessment of the internal coherence of Reinhold Niebuhr's writings on human nature, social justice, and democracy.

The focus will be on Niebuhr's original writings, especially *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (1941 & 1943), *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932), *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (1935), and *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (1944).

In addition to these main resources, the study will also rely on appropriate secondary literature and it will focus on all the prominent sources highlighted above in the literature overview.

Since this is a literature-based study in which all of the literature are in the public domain, no matters related to research ethics need to be clarified further in this paper. The entire study will, however, be conducted with due regard for, and acknowledgement of, good ethical and scholarly practice.

## **1.6 Structure of the research**

This first chapter identifies the research theme, and provide a literature overview and layout of the problem statement and research methods for this study. It introduces this study by focusing on the life and the writings of Niebuhr, and more specifically on the various theological, social, political, and international relations topics he engaged with.

Chapter two will examine his key theological assumptions. This deals with his understanding of human nature, and how it relates to his broader social and political thought, particularly as it relates to his conception of justice and social justice.

Chapter three will provide Niebuhr's criticism of various contemporary positions on the ordering of society in his quest for greater social justice. It will also trace the different influences that shaped his political thinking, as well as the changes within his social and political thought that led him towards his own position, namely Christian Realism.

Chapter four will consider his approach to, and interpretations of, the ordering of society, focusing specifically on his defence of democracy as the most appropriate ordering framework within which to achieve the greatest possible social justice.

The final chapter will present a summary of conclusions reached in the preceding chapters in view of the main research question.

## CHAPTER 2

### REINHOLD NIEBUHR ON HUMAN NATURE, JUSTICE AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

#### 2.1 Introduction

The following chapter considers Reinhold Niebuhr's views on human nature, which serves as the basis for his approach to the ordering of societies. He, in fact, builds the rest of his religious, social, and political thought on this understanding of human nature..

In taking a closer look at his position on human nature in *The Nature and Destiny of Man: Human Nature* (1941) and *The Nature and Destiny of Man: Human Destiny* (1943), this chapter situates Niebuhr within the larger debates on human nature. It is necessary to understand his paradoxical position on human nature to highlight his views on the possibilities within social structures, as well as on the limits within history caused by the self-interested nature of humans.

Niebuhr's position on human nature provides a further link to his views on justice, where love becomes an *impossible possibility* (Niebuhr 1956: 60) within the structures of history. In this, he sees love as the impossible ideal and justice as the relative embodiment of love in social structures. His views on love and justice clearly influence his desire for finding the appropriate means (including principles such as equality and freedom) through which to achieve greater justice within societies. Niebuhr is especially aware of the dangers of the collective egotism of groups in social behaviour. It is within this understanding of collective egotism that Niebuhr makes some of his clearest and unprecedented political and social statements. He views social justice as a political measure aimed at ensuring a balance of power in favour of promoting the well-being of all people within society.



Niebuhr's understanding of human nature is thus essential for his political thought and will be considered further in this chapter as far as it provides key insights from which Niebuhr then extrapolates his political thinking.

## **2.2 Different conceptualisations of human nature – Niebuhr in the larger discourse**

When attempting to understand and explore Niebuhr's theories on society and politics, the most appropriate place to start is with his view on human nature. Any consideration of his views in this regard, however needs to reflect on some of the prominent philosophical thinkers who also reflected on human nature throughout history, for Niebuhr clearly engages with these thinkers in his own work on the topic.

Inquiries into the essential and immutable character of human beings are some of the oldest and most important questions related to humankind in Western philosophy. It explores that which is innate to humans and independent to what society or cultures produces. It includes uncovering the characteristics, causes, and permanency of human nature. These questions also have important implications for ethics, politics, and theology (Heywood 2007b: 450).

The study of human nature dates back as far as Greek philosophy, especially to the philosophers Plato and Aristotle. Plato (1908: 235-269) describes humans as possessing both body and soul. He then further divides the soul into three parts, namely the rational, the spirited, and the appetitive. He associates the rational (or reasoning) part with the 'head' – thinking, logic and decision-making. The spirited part refers to the 'heart' – passions and feelings. Lastly, the appetitive part includes the human desire for pleasure, comfort, and physical satisfaction. Plato regarded reason as the supreme part of the soul, which ultimately rules over the spirit, the appetites and the body. Those people with a stronger reasoning capacity (such as philosophers), were regarded as 'higher types' of humans because of this capacity. Plato's student Aristotle (1999: 5), continued by explaining that humans are a particular kind of animal. They form part of households, clans, or villages, but their human reasoning ability enables them to develop and live in

more complex and larger societies with division of labour and law-making institutions. He views human reasoning as unique to humans and encourages them to aim for even higher levels of reasoning. These views of Plato and Aristotle on human nature and the importance of reason influenced contemporary conceptualisations of human nature.

This philosophical inquiry into human nature has continued into the early modern and late modern periods. Some important philosophical thinkers on human nature include the pessimist Machiavelli (1469-1527), who expressed his pessimistic views in some of his distinguished works, such as *The Prince* (1513) and *The Discourses* (1516). In *The Prince*, he makes it very clear that humans are “... ungrateful, fickle, false, cowardly, covetous ...” (Machiavelli 1952: 24). He argues that humans are selfish and will use power to ensure self-preservation and security at all costs. Similarly, Thomas Hobbes’s concept of human nature resembles that of Machiavelli’s. It is within his famous work, the *Leviathan* (1651) that Hobbes (1952: 84) describes the life of humans as “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short”, and the state of nature as a condition of conflict or war. Led by their instinct for self-preservation, he asserts that humans will use their strength to subdue or destroy others for their own security.

Conversely, John Locke develops a liberal political philosophy from his understanding of human nature, which he expresses in his work, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690). In Locke’s view, life is inconvenient at times, but since humans are rational, they are capable of finding ways of dealing with these inconveniences (Locke 1975: 525; 668). This tradition produced a line of political philosophers, as well as social and political thinkers such as Hume, Rousseau, Smith, Madison, Burke, Bentham, and Marx. Even though they differ widely in their approach, most of them view human nature as good. While Machiavelli and Hobbes argue that humans are inherently selfish, philosophers that view human nature as good believe that humans are born with the capacity for goodness but that circumstances and competition with others often lead to selfish behaviour. These philosophers have a high regard for human freedom and believe that rationality is an essential part of humans, which allows them to organise and enter into agreements with others for the sake of preserving their own freedom.

Even though these broad traditions of secular, social, and political thinkers greatly influenced Niebuhr, he was not only a political philosopher, but also a prominent theologian. Even though he did not regard himself a theologian, theologians such as Martin Luther, and Christian political thinkers such as St Augustine of Hippo significantly influenced his work on human nature. These men were also Church Fathers and Protestant Reformers who made a significant contribution to the inquiry into the understanding of human nature from a religious, and more specifically, a Christian perspective.

Social and political thinkers have been interested in human nature because of its importance for the understanding of political systems. Human beings are the key actors who make politics possible. This means that philosophers are drawn to the study of human nature, since humans are important components to understanding the makeup and functioning of political systems.

During the 1920s, in the early days of his writing career, Niebuhr did not yet have a well-elaborated theory on human nature. His main concern during his early years of writing was the prevalent injustices he witnessed in Detroit from the early 1900s. However, as his social and political writings matured during the 1930s, his concern shifted to the overly optimistic views of human nature within modern culture. For this reason, he desired a more realistic approach to human nature so as to influence the political decisions and policies of the day, all with the aim of achieving greater justice within society. Yet it was only during the 1940s that he wrote his most extensive work on human nature in *The Nature and Destiny of Man: Human Nature* (1941) and *The Nature and Destiny of Man: Human Destiny* (1943). In these works, his conception of human nature plays a fundamental role in his ethics, as well as in his social and political thought.

Niebuhr's social ethics was clearly influenced by his conception of human nature emanating from his freer and more critical approach to theology in comparison to other contemporary theologians. This is mainly because he had a lifelong concern for a responsible and functioning social ethic, which is a central focus of this study and

understanding of his political thought (Magill 1963: 1060). It is evident throughout his writings that Niebuhr's thought is based upon the Bible as well as Protestant reformism, which give his work a Protestant character. He does however directly engage with other interpretations of human nature, but mainly to demonstrate their explanatory and practical shortcomings.

### **2.3 Alternative positions on human nature**

In both volumes of *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Niebuhr explains his position on human nature in more detail only after he criticises prevailing and alternative positions to his 'Christian' conception of humans. He does this to show how these alternative views' "implicit assumptions undercut their explicit statements" (Malotky 2003: 103). His focus is never to be critical of these alternative positions on human nature just for the sake of being critical. Instead, he is critical because it defines the logical parameters from which he is able to explain his own conception of human nature.

He asserts that these alternative views of human nature distort both the relationship and the understanding of two central and inherent elements of human nature, namely the natural and the spirit. He explains that humans form part of nature because they are creatures of nature. Humans are thus involved in what Niebuhr variously refers to as the unities, the orders, or the forms of nature. This includes the vitality of nature, which is impulses and drives, as well as the forms and unities of nature, which is the normal instinctive determinants of humans such as gender and race. However, Niebuhr notes that humans are unique and different from animals, because they can destroy (within limits) the forms of nature, and they can create "new configurations of vitality" (Niebuhr 1996a: 27). Humans are able to do this because their freedom of spirit, as well as the forming capacity of spirit, enable them to transcend natural forms, direct and redirect vitalities, and create new realms of order and coherence. Consequently, human capacity for both creativity and destructiveness are central to 'being human', and it is human transcendence over nature that enables them to interfere with established forms and unities of vitality within nature (Niebuhr 1996a: 28). This will be explored in more detail later on. The

reason for highlighting this at this point, however, is to emphasise Niebuhr's argument that alternative views on human nature often empathize one element over the other - either nature or spirit. In doing so, they sacrifice the self by ignoring the importance of the co-existence within humans of both natural confines and spiritual freedom.

Within classical views of human nature, Niebuhr (1996a: 4-12) highlights Greek classicists, particularly Plato and Aristotle, as well as Roman classicists such as Stoics and their conceptions of human nature. As mentioned earlier, for classicists, the mind is identical to the soul, and since rationality is the highest element of the soul, reason is essentially, what makes people human. For all their differences, Niebuhr argues that the main problem with this is that classicists' views equate humans to the *rational man*, and the *rational man* to the divine and identical to God (Niebuhr 1996a: 8). Niebuhr then challenges two common errors made by these classical views. His first criticism is against their common dualism: making a clear distinction between the soul and the body, while assuming that the human body is evil and the human spirit is essentially good. The second mistake they make is what Niebuhr calls common rationality - they attach too much value on reason as the essential element of what makes a person human. These ideas of common dualism and common rationality formed the classical doctrine of humans. Niebuhr also links this to modern doctrines on human nature, since they have borrowed from the rationalism and dualism of the classical doctrine of human nature.

Following on from these classical views, modern culture's history includes different debates about what humans consist of essentially. Niebuhr typifies these debates as largely revolving around classical ideas of humans as rational beings, and also questions of people's relation to nature (Niebuhr 1996a: 4). According to Niebuhr (1996a: 56), these modern views (in different ways) make important, but inaccurate assumptions about human nature. He argues that modern views relate humans too closely either with nature or with spirit. For this reason, they do not understand that it is not a matter of the one or the other; instead, both nature and mind are equally important and function together as inherent parts of human nature. The metaphysics of modern views fails to comprehend that humans are essentially free as well as finite, and that these function together. This

makes it impossible to escape one or the other. Either they try to find purpose entirely within the natural world, or they try to escape from the natural world by attempting to find ways of transcending the environment into a timeless eternity (Niebuhr 1996a: 57).

Modern views also erroneously ‘equate’ or associate spirit with mind or reason. Although Niebuhr, as will be discussed later, validates reason as an important part of human nature, he is critical of modern views because they place such special importance on reason and they are therefore incapable of explaining the human ability to transcend reason (see Niebuhr 1947: 66 & 1996a: 15). Dorrien (2003: 468) explains what Niebuhr meant with transcendence in the following:

For Niebuhr, transcendence referred to the divine realm beyond all finite experience; to the principle or ground of reality, meaning, judgment, and hope; and to the capacity of the human spirit to transcend itself and relate to God. God is beyond society, history, and the highest ideals of existence, Niebuhr argued, yet God is also intimately related to the world. The human spirit finds a home and grasps something of the stature of its freedom in God’s transcendence, yet the self also finds in the divine transcendence the limit of the self’s freedom, the judgment spoken against it, and the mercy that makes judgment bearable.

Niebuhr thus views transcendence as access to a divine realm and not limited to human understanding or reason. God who made the world transcends and is thus beyond people, society and history, yet he has in intimate and permanent relation to the world. He believes that modern views do not realise that transcendence require a much more intricate understanding of human nature as both free and finite.

Niebuhr furthermore divides the modern understanding of human nature into three broad categories, namely naturalism, idealism, and romanticism.

- *Naturalism*

Naturalism situates humans in the natural order where they are completely identified with nature as physical human beings. For naturalists, humans are

merely part of the natural but, as Niebuhr argues, naturalism neglects the uniqueness and transcendence of the individual beyond the natural, because they fail to see the divine transcendence that is beyond people, society and history (Niebuhr 1996a: 28).

- *Idealism*

This differs from naturalism, in that it identifies humans with abstract universalities of the mind, which gives the mind priority over all concrete realities (Niebuhr 1996a: 31). Idealism focuses on the rational freedom of humans, but this is at the expense of their natural involvement in nature and their environment. Similar to classical views, many idealists believe that the spirit is identified with reason, and reason is identified with God (Niebuhr 1996a: 28). Absolute idealism, for instance, appreciates the depths of the human spirit since they believe that people have the capacity to transcend nature. Nevertheless, they fail to recognise that humans can also transcend reason because human freedom is not bound to its rational capacities but also find something of their stature and freedom in divine transcendence.

- *Romanticism*

Romanticism, as the third category of modern ideas, formed part of the debate between naturalism and idealism and rebelled against rationalist views. It denies both the idealists' claims that freedom and rationality are synonymous, and the naturalists' view that humans are mechanical by nature. Romanticism regards natural vitality as the source of human creativity, making natural unities and forming the sources of order and virtue (Niebuhr 1996a: 29). Romanticism presents people as feeling, imagination, and will. Niebuhr (Niebuhr 1996a: 41) argues that even romanticism is a deification of the self as its own creator. Ultimately however, romanticism loses the self in larger social collectives, where the collective, such as the nation, becomes the centre of existence. This gives humans an unqualified significance.

Niebuhr thus does not regard any of these modern views as adequate explanations of human nature and human relation to nature (Niebuhr 1996a: 56).

He does not end his assessment of the modern understanding of humanity there however. He is also particularly critical of what he calls *The Easy Conscience of Modern Man* (Niebuhr 1996a: 99). He argues that the *modern man* is overly optimistic about the idea of progress as the solution to the problem of evil in humans and within societies. Modern culture disregards the Christian doctrine of original sin; instead, they assert that humans have their own nature and are capable of solving their problems and mastering their fate through virtue and intelligence. Niebuhr thus regarded idealism, naturalism, and romanticism as overly optimistic views on how to deal with and overcome evil. For instance, idealists believe that the root of evil is in nature, so it is through humans' rational faculties that humanity can overcome and master nature, and thus free itself from evil. Conversely, naturalists and romanticists believe that the way to overcome evil is through harmony and unity with nature. This all implies that humans are essentially good. Idealists, naturalists, and romanticists alike, postulate human ignorance as the cause of human evil, and argue that evil can be overcome through education and social reform. Consequently, they believe that human advancement is possible, and will effectively lead to the decline of evil and the victory of good within history. Niebuhr asserts that these different modern views all present one-dimensional understandings of human nature, focused either on nature or reason. He believes that people have a too good opinion of themselves and are also unrealistic about the nature and the extent of evil in humans (Niebuhr 1947: 70). Niebuhr insists that history provides us with ample proof that these views are inadequate in their explanations of the complexity of human nature (Niebuhr 1934: 1; 116).

Niebuhr (1996a: 133) states that within these positions,

[m]an is not measured in a dimension sufficiently high or deep to do full justice to either his stature or his capacity for both good and evil or to understand the total environment in which such a stature can understand, express and find itself.



Niebuhr's response to these shortcomings is to argue that the Christian understanding of human nature is capable of combining the truths within, and avoided the shortcomings of, the alternative views. He believes that Christianity is able to present a better understanding and exposition of human nature. Furthermore, Niebuhr argues that this Christian view, if understood and applied correctly, can provide a way in which individuality achieves its highest development and overcomes the dangers of "the easy conscience of the modern man" (Niebuhr 1996a: 99).

Niebuhr thus proceeds to hold forth a conception of human nature that differs markedly from the above modern conceptions in that it draws directly on his Christian worldview. It is this distinctive conceptualisation of human nature, which ultimately shapes and informs his social ethic in that it provides him with a better basis for understanding social injustices and then ultimately with a more realistic approach for addressing it.

#### **2.4 Human freedom and finiteness: Niebuhr's paradoxical position on human nature**

The understanding of human nature held forth by Niebuhr endeavours to show how the Christian view is capable of presenting a truthful and realistic approach to human nature, while avoiding the shortcomings he identified within the alternative views. He argues that the Christian view of humans can be distinguished from all alternative views by the manner in which it interprets three aspects of human existence. These firstly include the Christian interpretation of the self-transcendent heights of the spiritual stature of humans, derived from the doctrine that humans are created in the image of God. Furthermore, it includes the Christian interpretation of human involvement in the necessities and contingencies of the natural world, which reveals their weaknesses, dependence, and finiteness. Lastly, the Christian view interprets evil of humans as inevitable when they are unwilling to acknowledge their dependence and finiteness, and so they often do not want to admit their insecurity but rather try to escape from it (Niebuhr 1996a). As Magill (1963: 1061) states, Niebuhr ultimately levels various criticisms against the obscurities

and confusions of alternative views to state the logic of the Biblical doctrine and to validate the adequacy of the Christian view.

From the commencement of *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Niebuhr explains that the problem with humans have always been themselves. Niebuhr (1996a: 1) states as a rough outline:

If man insists that he is a child of nature and that he ought not to pretend to be more than the animal, which he obviously is, he tacitly admits that he is, at any rate, a curious kind of animal who has both the inclination and the capacity to make such pretensions. If on the other hand he insists upon his unique and distinctive place in nature and points to his rational faculties as proof of his special eminence, there is usually an anxious note in his avowals of uniqueness which betrays his unconscious sense of kinship with the brutes.

Niebuhr uses the Christian interpretation to explain his doctrine of humans as creatures. Since God created the world and was satisfied with what he created, humans, as creatures, are not evil because of their finiteness as classical views often claimed. Correspondingly, God as Creator of the world transcends everything - he is vitality and form and the source of all existence. At the same time, creation is not God, but creation is also not evil, because it is God's creation and he deemed it good. For Niebuhr this reveals the importance of understanding that finiteness, dependence, and insufficiency are God's plan for creation, and so humans must accept this with reverence and humility (Niebuhr 1996a: 178).

Two prominent aspects of Niebuhr's thought are evident here: firstly, that God is the creator and his creation is good; secondly, that humans are understood from the standpoint of God, rather than from their unique rational faculties or from their relation to nature. Niebuhr's critical method of explaining the misinterpretations of the human condition suggests at least two assumptions about the self: the self is essentially free, but also essentially finite. Humans are more than nature, because God created them not only as finite and part of nature, but also as spirit and thus free from nature because the human spirit also relates to God who is transcendent over nature. He states:

The obvious fact is that man is a child of nature, subject to its vicissitudes, compelled by its necessities, driven by its impulses, and confined within the brevity of the years which nature permits its varied organic forms, allowing them some, but not too much, latitude. The other less obvious fact is that man is a spirit who stands outside of nature, life, himself, his reason, and his world (Niebuhr 1996a: 3).

Both these elements form an essential part of our humanity. Humans are constituted of both nature and spirit, and because of nature they are constricted and finite, but because of spirit they can stand above nature in true freedom. He further argues that any claim by persons about themselves and their stature, will be bound to this contradiction (Niebuhr 1956: 66; Niebuhr 1996a: 17).

Niebuhr further explores this dual nature of humans by considering the significance of human reason. Even though humans are finite creatures of nature, humans are clearly unique and different from other life forms, such as animals, because of their rational capacity. Niebuhr argues that humans are not simply subjected to the impulses of nature; instead, they have the rational capacity to transcend the natural. He explicitly states from the start that humans are children of nature, but they also possess the rational faculties to know that they are special and thus able to estimate a degree of transcendence over themselves (Niebuhr 1996a: 1). Humans can use their rational faculties to abstract themselves from the causal chain of nature and instinct, which brings them into a bigger scheme and purpose. This means that they are capable of arranging their lives to rational patterns, which may contradict the impulses of nature. Humans are therefore able to push beyond every fixed structure and context to ask distinctively human questions about the meaning of life. They do this because they are self-conscious beings with the capacity for self-determination. Yet, they cannot escape their finite and mortal nature through reason, as some classical and modern views assume, because it still forms an essential component of their human nature as part of God's creation (Niebuhr 1996a: 1).

Niebuhr then goes further. He suggests that, although humans have the ability to transcend the natural because of their rational capacity, reason cannot fully explain human transcendence. He argues that human transcendence goes beyond reason's ability

to form general concepts. Since the human spirit has the capacity to stand outside its natural self and the world (Niebuhr 1996a: 15).

To elaborate, Niebuhr (1996a) claims that human freedom goes further than transcendence over nature due to reason and can be described as the capacity for self-transcendence or “spiritual freedom”. Malotky (2003: 105) explains what Niebuhr means with spiritual freedom when he writes:

This spiritual freedom of the human individual is manifested in the individual's understanding of itself as a subject. We find that we can never completely identify ourselves with a particular aspect of history, even a rational one; for in the attempt to establish such an identification, we sense our distinctness from, and transcendence of, that aspect. Just as is the case with our transcendence over natural processes, we realize that we are something more than a rational being, because we are able to critique our own rationality. We are not fixed objects. We are self-conscious beings.

Whereas consciousness is a way of surveying the world and determining action from a governing centre, self-consciousness is an advanced degree of transcendence where the self is its object. The spiritual freedom that Niebuhr describes means that the self is more than a natural function or rational order that seeks satisfaction or coherence; it also seeks purpose in terms of its worth. The self wants to know what the ultimate meaning of life is. Niebuhr (1996a: 14) claims that this is the essence of religious impulse:

This essential homelessness of the human spirit is the ground of all religion; for the self which stands outside itself and the world cannot find the meaning of life in itself or the world. It cannot identify meaning with causality in nature; for its freedom is obviously something different from the necessary causal links of nature. Nor can it identify the principle of meaning with rationality, since it transcends its own rational processes, so that it may, for instance, ask the question whether there is relevance between its rational forms and the recurrences and forms of nature. It is this capacity of freedom, which finally prompts great cultures and philosophies to transcend rationalism and to seek for the meaning of life in an unconditioned ground of existence.

In other words, the self has the capacity for freedom and struggles to find meaning of life in itself or in the world because of a religious impulse to find meaning beyond the world. The reason why the self struggles with this is that the self stands outside itself and of the world. As Malotky (2003: 105) further explains, this is why Niebuhr thinks that human beings will never be fully satisfied with partial meaning; finding complete meaningfulness of life will have to extend beyond the particularities of history. As Niebuhr explains (1996a: 14):

The self knows the world, insofar as it knows the world, because it stands outside both itself and the world, which means it cannot understand itself except as it is understood from beyond itself and the world.

Even though humans have this spiritual freedom, they are still part of the natural. As a result, the self may have the rational and imaginative capacities for unlimited possibilities, but the self is still limited within a particular historical situation, time, and circumstances. In other words, Niebuhr would argue that even though humans have both the ability and freedom to stand beyond themselves, it does not absolve or free them from the limits of nature and a particular historical character. When they try to transcend their natural limitations, they will find that any new position they take will also have a particular historical and finite character. As a result, their ability to stand beyond themselves also enables them to realise that there will always be a position that they have not reached, and that they cannot achieve a final or absolute perspective (Niebuhr 1956: 66 & 1996a: 15).

Niebuhr realises that the intricate and complex relationship between human freedom and finitude has implications for the way in which humans attempt to find meaning within their historical situation. He believes that the historical context of people is crucial in understanding themselves, but he argues that people cannot find meaning and freedom solely as it is expressed historically. When people try to find meaning and freedom solely within the structures of history, they will find the causes of suffering and evil within

history itself. Niebuhr believes that this is dangerous because history is not the reason for human problems. Suffering and evil within history is caused by human sin. Therefore, understanding the problem of sin will help people to deal more adequately with evil and injustice within history (Niebuhr 1996a: 102).

## **2.5 The problem of sin**

A key component of Niebuhr's understanding of humans is that of original sin and its corrupting influence on human nature. In this regard thinkers, such as St Augustine of Hippo and Martin Luther, helped shape Niebuhr's position. He leaned heavily on St Augustine's view that pride is humanity's major problem (see Niebuhr (1956: 65 & 1996a: 198). Augustine has a pessimistic view of human nature in that he sees people as corrupted because of the sin they have committed. He uses the Biblical interpretation of Adam and Eve who were created by God to live in peace in the Garden of Eden and rule over everything. Instead of living and ruling peacefully over everything as intended, they deliberately disobeyed God's order and chose to eat the fruit from the forbidden tree in the Garden. Since they sinned by placing love for themselves ahead of love for God by choosing to disobey God, he expelled them from the Garden and therefore sin disrupted the natural order of justice. Their sin led to penalties of pain and death, which were passed onto their offspring. From then onwards, every human has been born with the same guilt of the original sin and have a defective will, which includes pride and self-love (Adams & Dyson 2007: 24).

Niebuhr did not necessarily agree with Augustine's literal approach of what happened in the Garden, but he uses Augustine's ideas to analyse human nature and the impact of the Fall of Man on the course of history. From Augustine's view, he highlights that sin is inherently part of human nature and human intent, and even though sin is unnecessary, it is inevitable (Niebuhr 1996a: 190).

For Niebuhr, the Christian faith reveals that history is not evil, but humans cause evil in history because of their inherent nature. He explains that “[o]nly in terms of the Christian

faith can man not only understand the reality of the evil in himself, but escape the error of attributing that evil to anyone but himself” (Niebuhr 1996a: 18). This reflects an uneasy conscience in people. Humans consist of both nature and spirit, which seems to entail a contradiction of finiteness and freedom. However, Niebuhr (1996a: 190) argues that:

It is not the contradiction of finiteness and freedom from which Biblical religion seeks emancipation. It seeks redemption from sin; and the sin from which it seeks redemption is occasioned though not caused, by this contradiction in which man stands.

In other words, Niebuhr emphasises that humans cannot blame sin for the defect of their essence. Sin is possible, not necessarily because of human freedom, but because of this self-contradiction that causes confusion in people. People are tempted by a situation because they stand at juncture between nature and spirit: the freedom of their spirit causes them to break the harmonies of nature, whereas the pride of their spirit prevents them from establishing new harmonies. People have the power to be both creative and destructive because human freedom is above nature and the structure of reason, however, people often fail to observe the limits of their finite existence (Niebuhr 1996a: 18).

Sin therefore, is not possible without freedom, but this freedom does not necessarily cause sin. Sin occurs when people try to escape their finiteness, because of their unwillingness to acknowledge or accept their creatureliness and dependence on God. Through their own will and effort, they try to make their lives independent and secure. Humans feel insecure about their natural limitations and finitude, and can easily overestimate their ability to achieve perfection (Niebuhr 1996a: 190). Herein lies what Niebuhr views as the greatest human sin, which is pride. God is thus replaced with something else, or the self. (Niebuhr 1996a: 198).

His explanation of sin as pride, and the dangers of both human self-centredness and human self-deification, establishes an important link between his view on human nature and social ethics. His detailed engagement with both human nature and sin all serve to further his argument on the challenges of justice among individuals and within societies.

He explains that when humans make themselves the centre of their existence, their pride and willpower lead to the subordination of, and consequently doing injustice to, others. Niebuhr further asserts that collective egotism in social behaviour is even more pronounced than in individual behaviour. He argues that all human groups – states, nations, races, classes, or churches – have a tendency to self-centredness through the rationalisation of their group interest (Niebuhr 1996a: 221).

In Niebuhr's thought, the problem of sin is an important link between human nature and the reasons for individuals' unjust behaviour. Nevertheless, Niebuhr is searching for answers to the problem of large-scale injustices, since such injustice is often a major issue within the organisation of societies. He is searching for logical answers to the challenges of injustices within societies.

However, before considering Niebuhr's views on such societal injustices directly, it is first necessary to explain his understanding of history. Niebuhr uses his understanding of human nature, sin, and the implications thereof to highlight and explain the possibilities and limits within history, which leads him to further conclusions about finding appropriate ways of organising society in order to promote greater social justice.

## **2.6 The possibilities and the limits of history according to Niebuhr**

It is important to realise that Niebuhr's conception of human nature is not only some abstract theological idea. Niebuhr cannot simply be regarded as a theologian; he is also a social and political thinker. As many philosophers do, Niebuhr studies and tries to understand human nature, for human beings are important components of social and political systems. This makes Niebuhr's conception of human nature a foundational component of the rest of his work. It is within the inherent nature of human beings that Niebuhr finds both the problems and the 'solutions' to social and political challenges of justice within societies. Before arriving at this point, however, it is first necessary to explain how Niebuhr's doctrine of human nature informs, as well as provides direction



and limits to his views on human involvement in history. The implication thereof for his social ethics and political thought also requires clarification.

It is possible to identify within his views on history two important contradictory conclusions, namely that making history is possible, but also that limits exist to whatever progress is made within history (Niebuhr 1996b: 71). As will become evident later on, it is this seemingly contradictory insight about history that informs his understanding of the relation between love and justice in his quest to achieving greater justice within societies.

In order to understand Niebuhr's contradictory conclusions about history, it is necessary to remember Niebuhr's conception of human nature as both finite, that is situated within nature, and also as transcendent over nature. For Niebuhr, this reveals something else about humans. Humans are creatures because they are part of nature; but their inherent freedom also gives them the capacity to be creators (Niebuhr 1996a: 16). It is in this understanding, many authors such as Brown (1986), Gilkey (2001), Harland (1960), Lovin (1995), and Weber (2002), root Niebuhr's conclusion about history, and see it as the link between his view on human nature and its implication for societies.

For Niebuhr the argument is as follows (see, for example, Niebuhr 1956: 66 & 1996b: 1). On the one hand, humans are embodied creatures who are dependent, vulnerable, and fearsome. They are also part of the natural order and history. Conversely, history includes more than the natural order, since humans can shape and change history while being dependent on a specific history and context. Human freedom enables people to reorganise, as well as transcend nature. They are also part of the sequence of nature and are thus capable of both making and knowing history. History itself results from dialogues and actions of humans, which is characteristically a mixture between freedom and necessity.

This means that people can be understood as distinctively human when they are able to understand their unique history. By implication, Niebuhr emphasises the relativity of history in which all people have a specific framework of meaning limited to their own

historical perspectives (Niebuhr 1996b: 1). This links back to Niebuhr's view on human nature and sin, since any attempt at social improvements within history must take human nature and sin seriously. It is clear that he uses his conception of human nature and the problem of sin as the major cause of the world's constant state of disarray. It also highlights why the proposed solutions to this chaos are often worse than the problems they were supposed to fix. There is no point in history where humans will find any final solution to the chaos in the world, because sin and freedom will always remain an essential part of human nature (Niebuhr 1996a: 2).

However, Niebuhr is not entirely pessimistic. He still believes that moral progress is possible within history and societies. According to him (Niebuhr 1996b: 72), it should come as no surprise that sinners are anxious and arrogant because that is part of being human. However, this condition does not necessarily have to lead to disorderliness - progress is still possible because history is an expression of human creativity, which is based on human freedom. Nevertheless, it is important to realise that progress will always operate alongside evil.

Therefore, humans have to recognise and be aware of their limitations and anxieties for there to be progress within society and in history. Weber (2002: 342) explains this view of Niebuhr well when he states that,

[t]he warrant for a realistic belief in human progress is anchored neither in self-reflection nor in our experience of the fallen world. Progress is grounded in the faith assumption that human beings bear the image of God. This image is first evident in our capacity to own up to our moral responsibility. We may irrationally and inevitably surrender to the temptations of anxiety and arrogance, but it is profoundly significant that we also repent of these temptations. Recognition of what is disordered is a first and significant step toward discovering the means for a better-ordered society.

Consequently, humans are creative beings made in God's image, which means that even though they are subject to the natural order, they are also capable of making it 'better'. Despite sin and human limits, progress within history is still possible, making humans

capable of acting justly and doing justice to others. For this purpose, Niebuhr wanted to find a solution in a faith that understands human involvement within history as well as this contradiction within history, and also without failing to understand that people do not have their final ground in the historical. He wanted people to realise that they cannot escape the realities of sin, guilt or human involvement within history. Instead, he encouraged a faith that would help people face these realities with humility and ultimately leading to their involvement in the promotion of justice within society. It also requires a faith that does not have its final ground in history, thus enabling it to deal with the issues of contemporary history. Furthermore, it must give people the faith to fulfil their tasks without illusions and despair - a faith that does not lead to cynical, or easy, passivity (Niebuhr 1996b: 212).

According to Patterson (1977: 17), Niebuhr's realistic approach to human nature and history was always informed by a much deeper ethical ideal. This ethical ideal comes from his Biblical understanding of love as the most important ethical principle. For this reason, we always find an important link between his understanding of justice and love. He attempted to create a stronger link between love as *agape* and justice, and searched for solutions to the challenges of justice in collective existence. His conception of human nature is therefore fundamental to both understanding human involvement in history and its possibilities within history. This includes the possibilities of, and limits to, generating and promoting greater justice within societies (Niebuhr 1996b:71).

Before analysing how Niebuhr understood and explained justice, and how he related it to political systems and different ways of organising societies, it is first necessary to identify some of the most pervasive conceptions of justice for it will help to situate and contextualise Niebuhr's own engagement with justice and social justice.

## **2.7 Grappling with the meaning of justice and social justice**

The concept justice refers to moral judgements based on ethics, religion, rationality, and law. Essentially, it speaks of giving people what they are due or entitled to (Miller 2003:

76). Theorists, however, grapple with what it means to give people what they are due. They all have different views on what justice is and what is required to ensure greater justice among individuals. This includes giving people what they are due according to their merit, work, need, rank, or legal entitlement (Dukor 1997: 508). Different conceptions of justice provide different justifications for the manner in which people should be treated. Some interpretations of justice entail treating people equally before the law, but others regard it as unfair to treat people equally when they have different talents and make different contributions (Kulikovsky 2007: 3; Vincent 2012: 64).

Furthermore, questions about justice include, “[d]oes a just society seek to promote the virtue of its citizens? Or should the law be neutral toward competing conceptions of virtue, so that citizens can be free to choose for themselves the best way to live?” (Sandel 2010: 9). Justice has been referred to as a concept that represents the good, fair, right or morally correct. It is a moral or normative concept, but it is more than simply that what is ‘moral’. Justice is a moral judgement of distributing reward and punishment, which in itself remains debatable (Dowding 2004: 28 & Heywood 1994: 125).

Many different schools of thought grapple with the difficult questions of justice. Debates about what justice means or should entail are complex and controversial, owing to the various understandings and interpretations thereof. Miller states that, “there is no sign of an emerging consensus on how justice is to be understood” (Miller 2013: 40). Heywood (1994: 125) summarises this clearly when he writes, “[j]ustice is perhaps the archetypal example of an ‘essentially contested’ concept. No settled or objective concept of justice exists, only a set of competing concepts.” It leads to one important conclusion: ultimately, the choice as to what justice entails is a judgement call (Miller 2003: 84; Sandel 2010: 261; Swift 2001: 17). A person’s choice or adherence to one of the various conceptions or interpretations of justice depends largely on their context and the value commitments they hold dear. These in turn, are shaped by norms that emanate from their deep-seated ethical and religious beliefs. People’s morals and values consequently determine what they think justice and a just society is and what is necessary and

justifiable in order to achieve greater social justice. This will include the social and political organisational structures that should be in place to facilitate its attainment.

Whereas different conceptions of justice deal with the way in which individuals fulfil their roles towards others in society, social justice has political implications. Social justice is a term that became widely known and frequently used from the nineteenth century onwards. It is more specific than what justice is. Social justice points to the quest for justice through the state's involvement with various social issues and the institutions created within societies to deal with it, as well as the ability to change these institutions through political decision (Heywood 2007a: 33; Miller 2003: 85).

Justice is concerned with how individuals should treat one another, whereas social justice questions what the law and state policy should be and how society should be organised to qualify as being just to all in the society (Miller 2003: 78; Sandel 2010: 6). Justice relates to whether individuals act justly or unjustly, whereas social justice relates to what it means for society to act justly or unjustly (Swift 2001: 9). Social justice questions how social and political institutions are placed to deal with injustices prevalent throughout societies. It further questions how these institutions can ensure the just distribution of both benefits and costs; if and how it should address inequalities within society; as well as how this will lead to further improvements and developments across society. Consequently, the role of the state to promote social justice includes debates on policies and actions taken by government to promote human rights and to achieve a greater degree of equality among different groups and individuals within society (Miller 2003: 77, 84).

Michael Sandel (2010: 19) provides a fascinating and a comprehensive representation of some of the major debates on justice. He identifies a number of different schools of thought, each providing a different emphasis in its thinking about justice, particularly: (i) justice focused on virtue; (ii) justice focused on welfare; and (iii) justice focused on freedom and social equality. Even though these differing conceptions focus on the broader understanding of justice, they do feed directly into the narrower idea of social justice, and into the role of both the state and the government in promoting justice within

societies. The different debates also provide important insights to Niebuhr's understanding of social justice.

### 2.7.1 Virtue

The first way of thinking about justice according to Sandel (2010: 20), is justice as virtue. Some of the earliest proponents of this line of thinking were the Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle. They encouraged a distribution of resources among individuals according to their social status and worthiness. Virtue is an important way of thinking about justice, because justice as virtue is more than just a set of principles. Instead, virtue focuses on the level at which someone deserves to be valued and it regulates relationships with others. According to Sandel (2010: 186), Aristotle argues that justice is teleological and requires figuring out what the purpose, nature or end is of the social practice in question. Justice is also honorific and requires debate about the virtues that should be honoured to find the *telos* or purpose of a practice. Therefore, Sandel (2010: 187) argues that for Aristotle “debates about justice are, unavoidably, debates about honor, virtue, and the nature of the good life.” People should receive what they deserve but this depends on what is being distributed and the virtues relevant to what is distributed. Justice as virtue is about the content of a person's character, and for Aristotle this means that what is just depends on the merit of each person's ability, according to their relevant excellence. Those who are able to best realise the purpose of what is distributed deserve it since they will be best in achieving the purpose, end or goal of that which is distributed. This makes a distinction between people, not based on their utility but based on their virtuousness. It is, however, challenging to determine what people deserve, be it equal distribution of material resources or equal opportunity for all. It is also arduous to determine why people deserve to be treated justly, for example, whether it should be based on status or entitlement, or whether it should be dependent on the work and the effort of people.

Niebuhr agrees that justice is about virtue since it is about giving each person what they are due. As Morris (2015: 103) explains, Niebuhr “admits that justice is a virtue, the possession of individual moral agents that inclines them to good moral responses in a variety of situations.” Nevertheless, this desire developed from his personal and

theological convictions that all people are valuable and should be treated justly not based on desert, status or character, but because they are created and loved by God. Niebuhr makes a distinction between the value of someone and the virtue of that person. Every person is equally important and valuable because they are made in the image of God (Niebuhr 1996a: 14). Gilkey (2001: 204) explains,

[a]ll persons are of value, even if they have little virtue – that is because God loves them and because they are autonomous persons, ends in themselves. The value of those who suffer remains and calls for our justice; but this presence of value in the oppressed does not mean that those who are oppressed are thereby virtuous or selfless.

This will be discussed in detail later in the chapter, but it reveals why he had such a great desire to promote justice within societies. His desire to promote justice is based not on a person's character or what they deserve due to their character. Giving people love and justice, even if people lack virtue, is thus always grounded in their value as human beings, which makes justice essential simply on the grounds that every person is valuable because they are human.

### **2.7.2 Welfare**

Sandel (2010: 19) refers to the maximisation of welfare as one prominent way of thinking about justice. Those who promote welfare are primarily concerned with the material equality of people within society. Principles such as liberty, desert or merit are valuable insofar as it affects welfare, but the main concern is therefore how the distribution of goods within society affects the welfare of people (Stanford 2013). The most famous promoters are utilitarians who define welfare (or utility) as the distribution of goods to ensure greater happiness for the greatest number of people (Sandel 2010: 19). Jeremy Bentham (2000: 49) and John Stuart Mill (1863: 5) are the main proponents of utilitarianism. They argue that goods should be distributed throughout society to the extent that it ensures the greatest benefit for the greatest number of people within society.

There are many different theories on welfare and this is one of the most prevalent understandings of justice and social justice nowadays.

One of the main reasons why welfare as justice is prominent is because it is also deeply rooted in discussions on inequality and helping the disadvantaged within society. Here, the emphasis is on the distribution of resources to create greater levels of equality within society. Even though Niebuhr supports welfarists' movements towards greater distribution of resources to the least advantaged groups within society, he disagrees with the way in which this focus on welfare developed from utilitarianism of the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. Niebuhr (1947: 29) argues that it is a deficient definition of social justice because,

[this] theory manages to extract a covertly expressed sense of obligation toward the 'greatest good of the greatest number' from a hedonistic analysis of morals which really lacks all logical presuppositions for any idea of obligation, and which cannot logically rise above an egoistic view of life.

Therefore, Niebuhr is not convinced that social justice can be achieved through the economic distribution of resources alone. It also requires a deeper conviction that justice is about understanding the value of individuals in their relation to God and to others. Niebuhr fears that the focus on the distribution of welfare is an inadequate understanding of justice, because motivations for justice should originate from deeper ethical convictions. These convictions should be informed by an understanding of the dangers of human freedom (Niebuhr 1947:30 & 1956: 87). Although welfarists emphasise the well-being of the majority, this is often at the expense of individual freedom. Humans are also inherently selfish. Instead of distributing resources more equally, the privileged classes will ultimately benefit, because they have the power to determine the greatest happiness for their own interest (Niebuhr 1947: 29).

As mentioned earlier, Niebuhr regards justice as important due to his personal conviction that humans are valuable by virtue and because they are created equally by a loving God.



He also values individual freedom because he believes that an essential part of human nature is human freedom. This is why it is appropriate to explain and to place Niebuhr within the different debates surrounding justice as freedom and social equality.

### **2.7.3 Freedom and social equality**

According to Sandel (2010: 19), another way of thinking about justice is to connect justice to freedom – respecting the freedom and the rights of the individual. This includes a wide range of theories that can be divided into two camps. The first is the laissez-faire camp, which consists of free-market libertarians. For them, justice involves “respecting and upholding the voluntary choices made by consenting adults” (Sandel 2010: 20). The second is the fairness camp and includes a more egalitarian approach to justice. For them, unfettered markets are neither just nor are they fair, which means policies are necessary to remedy social and economic disadvantages and provide fair opportunities.

These different understandings that view social justice in terms of the debates around freedom and equality in society include a wide spectrum of thinkers, including egalitarians. The strict egalitarians believe that humans are morally equal, which is best reflected in equality of material goods and services. One of the most famous theorists in this regard is Karl Marx (1887: 7), who argued that social justice should emphasise redistribution according to human need. Notwithstanding, many arguments have been made against radical equality within societies, including that it is impractical, unrealistic, restricts individual freedom, stifles productivity, and conflicts with what people deserve (Stanford 2013).

Those opposed to radical equality support freedom as an essential part of understanding justice and social justice. Proponents of freedom as justice believe that individual freedom is necessary for people to use their abilities and talents freely and productively and to receive compensation according to their work and effort. A just society is therefore a society where individuals are able to decide freely what they want and where they want to work. At the same time, people can engage in economic activity in markets, which

establishes the conditions where individuals are able to exchange property by mutual agreement (Sandel 2010: 19). These include libertarians such as Friedrich von Hayek (1979: 62), Milton Friedman (2002: 2), and Robert Nozick (1974: 12 & 333), who argue that the state should not interfere through coercive redistribution, because this goes beyond the state's role of meeting basic needs and it interferes unjustifiably with individual liberty (Swift 2001: 21). They favour and prioritise the principle of individual property ownership. The state's role is only to protect individual property rights; it is up to the individual to decide what they want to do with their resources (Swift 2001: 48).

Nevertheless, unrestricted freedom to individuals often leads to unequal distribution of resources, especially towards those who have greater advantage over others within societies. Many factors outside people's control affect their ability to compete effectively with others who have greater advantages. This has led to a greater focus on the relation between freedom and social equality in debates on social justice. One of the most influential interpretations of social justice comes from John Rawls. Rawls (1999: 11) is known as a left liberal or egalitarian liberal, who proposes a theory of justice as fairness. He views social justice as the means to ensure the protection of equal access to liberties, rights, and opportunities, while taking care of those who are least advantaged within society. Even though he values equality, he believes that inequalities in society are acceptable if every person receives equal opportunities within society; inequalities must be organised in such a way that it benefits the least advantaged members in society. Rawls is searching for the most appropriate principles that would ensure citizen freedom and equality (Ho 2011: 6; Maffettone 2010: 78; Schaar 1980: 162; Swift 2001: 2).

The different conceptions and interpretations of justice and social justice are, as mentioned earlier, judgement calls emanating from deep-seated ethical and religious beliefs. Miller (2013: 41) explains this well when he states that, “[w]e develop theories of justice, I shall assume, because we want to order and explain our intuitive beliefs about what fairness requires in different situations – beliefs that are at least to some degree uncertain and conflicting, whether within each person's thinking, or between different people” (Miller 2013: 41). The morals and the values that determine what people find

justifiable to achieve greater social justice, will also include social and political organisational structures to facilitate the attainment of social justice.

Niebuhr is a clear demonstration of this dynamic. He holds a specific understanding of justice and social justice which emanates directly from his normative commitments. He was however very self-aware in this process and was able to coherently clarify and justify the links between his metaphysical stances and his commitment to social justice.

When Niebuhr (1956: 101) writes about justice, he consistently uses a biblical understanding of justice. Lovin (1995: 206) is able to explain Niebuhr's biblical understanding practically when he writes that Niebuhr uses a moral concept of doing what is right, which is more than just pursuing people's own desires and protecting their interests. It is also about wanting the same as what they have for their neighbours and living in harmony with their neighbours. For Niebuhr it is about people wanting the best for others, and treating them in the manner in which they themselves would want to be treated. This means that people are just when they choose to care for, and look after the well-being of others.

However, pursuing the good of others so as to ensure greater justice among individuals requires more than individual action. It also requires that the moral and social rules of a community enable and enhance such just behaviour and choices rather than discourage it. These rules should be based on some standard of what is right and what is just within a society (Dukor 1997: 505). Niebuhr's interest however went beyond just that which was directly required to establish greater justice among individuals and within society. He was also interested in the political organisation of societies so as to promote and enable such society-wide justice (Niebuhr 1947: 144 & 1996b: 253).

When situating Niebuhr within the larger debates surrounding social justice, he was, to a degree, an early proponent of liberal egalitarian principles, but with a 'theological twist'. Niebuhr's understanding of social justice relates more closely to debates on justice as freedom and social equality. This will be explained in more detail in the following

chapters, especially as it relates to his understanding of democracy. It is, however, necessary to emphasise that he valued individual freedom, although not at the expense of others. The selfishness that led to unacceptably high levels of inequality between different groups within society deeply disturbed him (Niebuhr 1934: 114). This selfishness in people and groups that he observed within societies which led to such great levels of inequality had a significant impact on him and led him on a quest to do something about it, including a search for political solutions that would challenge and resist this selfishness and help ameliorate its impact within society.

Niebuhr lived within a society where many people viewed justice as the individual's personal responsibility. People did not view politics or political institutions and structures as important instruments in achieving greater social justice. However, Niebuhr was one of the political thinkers who tried to link individual responsibility to the possibilities of achieving greater social justice through political institutions. To this task he brought a specific conception of social justice, informed by his Biblical understanding of human nature and history. This metaphysical basis enabled him to see justice through the eyes of love and it was this link between love and justice which led him to his eventual conception of social justice. This robust conception of social justice then informed his social action and his understanding of political structure and order.

## **2.8 Niebuhr's conception of justice and social justice - love in realisable action**

In light of his ultimate quest of helping to order society more justly, Niebuhr first wanted to establish the appropriate ethical framework within which to situate his social and political thought. His argument rests on the Christian interpretation and conception of love as a grounding for justice (see Niebuhr 1956: 61 & 1996b: 255).

### **2.8.1 Love in Niebuhr's ethical analysis – *agape***

Niebuhr views love as the ultimate value that all persons share. He specifically uses the core Christian understanding of love, namely *agape* - or self-sacrificial and suffering love

– for this purpose. Christ’s crucifixion for all human sin best expresses this understanding of love, since Christ sacrificed his life to save humankind from sin and death. Niebuhr views this as God’s ultimate sacrifice to demonstrate the lengths to which God would go to overcome human brokenness. Niebuhr sees this as the ultimate attestation to ethics and to the nature of Christian love in its perfection. It is important to notice that Niebuhr regards *agape* as impossible to achieve within societies because of its self-sacrificing and radically self-giving nature; humans are simply too selfish. *Agape* is also transcendent and supernatural and can therefore never be a wholly adequate social ethic, especially in the creation of larger groups within societies, nations, and empires (Niebuhr 1956: 43 & 1996: 59). As Lovin explains (1995: 204), people do not have the capacity or the resources to supply everything that everyone needs. Likewise, when organising societies, *agape* also competes with selfishness and power, which will triumph over love in societies.

Although *agape* is difficult to achieve, Niebuhr relates love to social activism because the biblical understanding of love requires action. *Agape* is at the heart of Niebuhr’s personal motivation for caring about social justice. He tries to find ways to achieve greater justice among individuals and within societies. This is where he changes his position from this perfect love model to a model of social ethics, relating love to essential social principles.

In brief, Niebuhr regarded love as the way in which people would live had they not been selfish. Unselfish people would want the best for their neighbours and for others. He bases this on the love ethic of Christ, which is ultimately about people loving God and loving their neighbours. It is this understanding of love that is implied when the Bible uses the Greek word *agape*. Niebuhr emphasises that *agape* holds higher value than the human love of treating others as oneself would want to be treated. Instead, *agape* is the love of God or Christ for humankind, who willingly dies for humanity. Humanity can express *agape* when they realise what God has done for them and they can adore God because of what He has done for humanity. They feel secure in their love for God and place their trust in Him. When humans realise that their lives are secure in God, they are able to relinquish some of their selfishness and become more open to loving others

(Niebuhr 1956: 53, 1996a: 288 & 1996b: 71). Together with this, Niebuhr (1956: 127) regards this love as the motive for social action. He insists that even though *agape* is transcendent over history, Christ not only took the wrath of God and human sin on the Cross. He also became the revelation of God in history, so that God's love can be revealed to humans through Christ. Furthermore, he argues that *agape* is the standard for both motive and action. He believes that through humility before God, humans avoid the pretensions that distort their lives, knowing that they are always in danger of becoming corrupted since perfect *agape* can never be achieved completely within history (Niebuhr 1956: 99; Niebuhr 1996b: 71, 85).

Initially, in *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, he calls the relation between love and justice an '*impossible possibility*' (Niebuhr 1956: 61). He describes love as possible because humans are able to affirm others, the world, and themselves as meaningful parts of a universe created by a loving God. It, nevertheless, remains impossible to fulfil this moral ideal completely. Christians would agree that it is impossible to live up to pure *agape* and realise that they need to be saved by grace and not out of human effort. Even non-Christians who try to be moral also fail or choose to live for themselves. The reason for this is, even when human intentions may be good, their expression of love will always fall short because of the inherently sinful nature of humans (Niebuhr 1956: 62). In his thought, love will always act as inspiration and motivation in seeking greater levels of justice within societies. However, it cannot replace justice, because justice is the degree of love that can be achieved under conditions where people seek their own conflicting interests at the expense of the greater social good. It is for this reason that people need rules within the organisation of any given community. Since the law of love cannot apply directly to political, economic, and social realities, justice becomes an approximation of love within societies (Niebuhr 1996b: 256).

Practically, Niebuhr viewed justice as a matter of balance within societies. Niebuhr argued that justice is meaningful when it produces an equilibrium of power between competing groups within society. He thus viewed government as central in managing the complex balances of power between different groups (Niebuhr 1996b: 275). This will be

explained in detail later, but by way of illustration as to what Niebuhr meant with justice as a principle towards a greater equilibrium of power, it includes group actions within society, as well as the positive role of government as instrument for distributive justice. Niebuhr supported the formation of trade unions as a way of protecting workers against the dangers of the exploitative nature of the capitalist laissez-faire economy. He was also a supporter of the African American struggle to gain equal dignity and to redress past grievances through social and political means. Throughout, he supported government as an instrument of distributive justice. He also approved of Roosevelt's New Deal, which ensured that government assisted citizens with basic social security (Paton 1977). Although Niebuhr's political and social involvements were admirable and examples of his strides towards greater justice within societies, there were also those who criticised his views on justice.

### **2.8.2 Niebuhr's link between *agape* and justice**

Despite Niebuhr's compelling argument, Bennett (1956: 57) criticises Niebuhr's work for not distinguishing adequately between love and justice. Niebuhr, however, does not separate love from justice. Instead, he places them in a unique and dynamic relationship, and describes this relationship as “[t]he higher possibilities of love, which is at once the fulfilment and the negation of justice, [and] always hover[s] over every system of justice” (Niebuhr 1996a: 302). Niebuhr, therefore, sees this relation as a dialectic relationship, where justice becomes love in realisable action. People appeal to justice because of this sense of obligation to others, and love is necessary to understand what justice requires if they do not want it to become a minimalist and self-serving definition of justice (Niebuhr 1996b: 261). Love, when in action in society, gives rise to schemes and principles of justice because it is a love that humbles people and prevents them from taking advantage of others. More specifically, within societies, love fulfils justice because Niebuhr (1996a: 313) regards love as,

...the end term of any systems of morals. It is the moral requirement in which all schemes of justice are fulfilled and negated. They are fulfilled because the obligation of life-to-life is more fully met in love than is possible in any scheme of equity and justice.

Love is thus the source of justice. Love finds expression in complex human relations through the pursuit of justice; it draws justice into greater achievements of goodwill. Although justice approximates love, love is the dynamic motive for the establishment of justice. Love can often raise justice to new heights and possibilities. Consequently, love is the end, whereas justice is the means. Justice can therefore be realised in indeterminate degrees, but there can be no perfect fulfilment of these realisations (Niebuhr 1996b: 255). Niebuhr (1996a: 313) sees love as the driving force in seeking the best possible social order, whereas justice is the instrument and the application of love within society.

However, all historic conceptions of justice will embody some elements that contradict the law of love, including interests of class, viewpoints of nations, prejudices of age, and illusions of culture. These negative elements instil, both consciously and unconsciously, norms that regulate societies and lead to the domination of some groups over others (Niebuhr 1996b: 265).

Although many scholars admire Niebuhr for his understanding of human nature and for applying this knowledge to society and human interaction, authors such as Emil Brunner (1956: 30) criticises Niebuhr for his lack of adequately conceptualising and explaining justice. He argues that Niebuhr never worked out a clear conception of justice to explain the difference between the demands of justice and the ethical norm of love. Even though Brunner admires Niebuhr's dialectical theology and his ability to translate his theological language into a philosophy of culture and social criticism, Brunner still argues that Niebuhr did not adequately distinguish justice from love and in what relation it stands to love. Equally important for Brunner is whether Niebuhr's contextualisation of justice offers any real normative guidance. Ultimately, as a contextual analyst and one who offers a critique of social issues and political policy in the name of justice, critics believe



that Niebuhr should have been more transparent about the fundamental and concrete choices that are required for his views on justice (Brunner 1956: 31).

Other critics argue that his understanding of the law of love was an inadequate moral compass for greater justice. Malotky (2003: 110), for example, provides a powerful criticism against Niebuhr's law of love and the manner in which he relates it to justice. He asserts that even though people may know that it is morally right to love, Niebuhr is not always clear on what people should practically do once they have decided to love. Love gives minimal direction of what to do in practice. Albeit, the only direction Niebuhr provides is that people have to act with humility since they know they fall short of this ideal love. Acting with humility allows humans to approach others with the knowledge that sin limits and often distorts their own vision.

Malotky (2003: 110) goes further and explains that another problem with Niebuhr's explanation of the law of love in relation to justice is that efforts to achieve greater justice are always approximations of the ideal. These approximations are supposed to act as the standards of comparison, but the problem is to discern which of the many different approximations are closest to the ideal, since it depends largely on the different contexts or the particular situation. This means that historicity will significantly influence any standard of measurement used. Malotky continues his criticism by arguing that this influence of historicity will make it difficult to determine which human relations or social structures best represent the law of love, or is closest to true harmony. Essentially, the conceptualisation of the law of love will be prejudiced to a particular situation, since particularity will taint conceptions of the ideal.

From Malotky's (2003) criticism, it is clear that Niebuhr is reluctant to define a way of achieving an ideal status, since its proximity to the ideal can only be assessed from everyone's own impression. This makes it difficult to adjudicate conflicting claims within society and between individuals, because no universal truth exists. Moreover, it is possible to establish common moral ground only when there is a sufficient overlap between the respective impressions. This is unlikely to always happen, but if it does

happen, it will be coincidental - not a sign of universality or truth. In conclusion, critics argue that Niebuhr's self-contradictory position makes his pragmatic ethic complicated and difficult.

Even though Niebuhr did not give a clear vision or certainty of what a just society would look like, it was not because he did not have an answer. Instead, he did not think it was possible to provide an absolute definition of what a just society would entail. The law of love was the important motivation in seeking greater justice (Niebuhr 1996a: 313), but Niebuhr was convinced that any definition of justice is determined by experiences of local deprivations and exploitations. What emerges then is not a general principle, but simply a wider extension of local claims (Niebuhr 1996b: 256). Many different authors (including Bennett 1956: 50; Bingham 1993: 84; Gilkey 2001: 143; Harland 1960: 91; Lovin 1995: 3; Patterson 1977: 17) have appreciated Niebuhr's position in this regard. They emphasise that Niebuhr did not think it was possible to determine with precision, or provide a specific definition of justice within a particular context, mainly because of his awareness of the dangers of human nature's self-interest. They feel that he also understood the difficulty in finding absolute solutions to society's challenges and that he thus opted for finding approximate solutions.

Although no perfect justice exists, Niebuhr remains hopeful that it is still possible to organise societies according to principles that approximate to the ideal of love. Societies will never be able to achieve perfect and sacrificial love, since there is an element of self-interest always present. Finding principles that would promote greater social justice is still possible though. As explained earlier, love will often inspire and motivate in the search for greater levels of justice within societies. If this is true, then love will inform the principles within societies to promote justice. From Niebuhr's view, perfect love values every individual since humans are created in the image of a loving God, but humans are also created equal (Niebuhr 1956: 8). As a result, love holds every individual life in high regard, and promotes equality among all people. For this reason, liberty and equality become essential principles and aspects of justice. Niebuhr emphasises that these principles are transcendent, or what he later calls regulative, because they can never be

perfectly realised within societies (Niebuhr 1996b: 263). If love motivates justice, then equality becomes an important guiding principle for justice - greater equality among individuals and groups within societies point to *agape* as the final norm of justice (Niebuhr 1996b: 264).

### **2.8.3 Transcendent principles of justice and organising societies**

Niebuhr refers to equality and liberty as transcendent principles for they have ‘practical universality and are essentially universal’ (Niebuhr 1996b 263). By this he means that they are accepted and understood on a large scale across history, and that many cultures acknowledge them. These principles should not be limited to a specific time and place; however, they can only be tested in history through interpretative methods that synthesise culturally and historically specific ideas into more inclusive ones. For this reason, no rational tests are able to judge the principles as absolute or universal (Niebuhr 1996b: 264).

Similar to the law of love, these principles state ideals, and are not necessarily limited to equality and freedom but Niebuhr uses the two principles as illustrations since he regarded both as important and broadly accepted and understood principles. Nevertheless, these ideals cannot be realised fully in history, because these are principles of justice that cannot be treated as historical justice. Lovin (1995: 218) explains Niebuhr’s definition of justice in any given community as a product and a synthesis of different transcendent principles within a specific historical context. This results in an outcome that no group, class or individual would have arrived at were it not for this synthesis (Niebuhr’s 1996b: 265).

Niebuhr notably analyses the principle of equality so as to illustrate what he means with transcendent principles of justice (Niebuhr 1996b: 264). During the early 1930s, Niebuhr was more radical in his drive for greater equality (Niebuhr 1934: 169), but in the late 1930s onwards, his advocacy became more cautious. He began to realise that the strict imposition of equality could threaten societies, and that it would have a detrimental effect

on the efficiency and freedom of individuals within society. Nevertheless, he continued to regard equality as an essential principle for the achievement of greater justice (Niebuhr 1996b: 264).

Niebuhr (1947: 113) acknowledges the necessity of inequalities within societies but questions extremely high levels of inequalities between different groups as well as the privileged groups' justification for it. He does not agree when dominant groups within societies use their social power to gain and enjoy greater privilege than what their function or need requires. Those who benefit from inequalities will generally justify these inequalities for different reasons. These include either that they deserve their privileges for their hard work, or that it is necessary to ensure the proper performance of societies. However, they hide the historic fact that privileged members of the community use their power to appropriate an excess of privilege not appropriate for their function or need (Niebuhr 1996b: 264). As will be discussed in great detail in chapter three, during his life Niebuhr witnessed the burgeoning of capitalism in the Ford industry in Detroit. He ended up opposing this growth since it was at the expense of those working in the factories (Stone 1972: 31). When privileged groups enjoy unjustifiable levels of privilege, it leads to unwarranted levels of inequalities between groups and it neglects the pursuit for greater social justice.

Within Niebuhr's analysis, justice within a historical context is always an approximation of, and contradictory to, the ideal love; it can never be fully achieved. Given that human history defies rather than observes the limits of nature, achieving justice remains a challenge. That is why Niebuhr believes that, "[i]t becomes a task of conscious political contrivance in human history to mitigate conflict and to invent instruments for enlarging mutuality of social existence" (Niebuhr 1996b: 275).

For this reason, he deems it is possible for people to use moral resources and to find political instruments to deal with the challenges of injustices within societies. To achieve greater justice and levels of equality within societies, it also requires a greater balance of power. This then relates Niebuhr's ethics directly to politics. Justice institutionalises the

moral demands of love, it thus becomes the measure within communities that provides a balance between competing groups, and that establishes an equilibrium of power (Niebuhr 1996b: 256).

Niebuhr's application of social ethics to concrete situations is therefore also concerned with the relation between justice and power. He is mindful of the egotism of social groups and realises that their power must be 'checked'. For him, this struggle for justice is largely about increasing the power of the victims of injustice. In Niebuhr's (1996b: 266) thinking, the essence of justice is that the claims of all parties be taken into consideration.

This means that every justice system should stem from a compromise between the different contending groups within society. This compromise implies that in general no group should consistently get all that it wants, and that selfish aspirations should often be restrained by force. The achievement of justice is dependent on equilibrium of power. Justice, as Niebuhr views it, is not satisfactory when there is a great unequal distribution of power (Niebuhr 1934: 8). Instead, it then becomes the will of the most powerful and the law of the ruling power, with disregard to the claims of the weaker groups within society. Within the political organisation of societies, there should always be some form of balance between those with power and those with less or none. There should be dialectic of claims and counterclaims between different groups within society (Niebuhr 1934: 231; Niebuhr 1996b: 275). These claims are the different demands of various groups and it is embedded within a specific situation or context.

Stone (1972: 233) clearly explains what Niebuhr understands of justice and power as it relates to politics in the following statement:

In a society in which the important decisions are made via political action, to pursue justice means to engage in politics. The struggle for justice is the struggle for power, in part. Justice without power is a vague ideal; power without justice is either chaos or tyranny, depending upon how it is organized. Given Niebuhr's understanding, politics is not strange ground for a Protestant social moralist; rather, it is his proper field of study.

Within these political efforts and actions, Niebuhr describes the role of the state and the government as the balancer of power and justice. Politics is the effort to establish a balance of power within society. Nevertheless, Niebuhr does not have high expectations of politics, because it is always under the condition of sinful human nature. That is why caution and wisdom is necessary within any political effort and process. The balance of power should not be the goal in itself, but rather the necessity to decide on some form of social justice. For Niebuhr, power implies order and needs morality for it to be legitimate power. Furthermore, for power to be effective within the organisation of societies, it should appeal to justice. Therefore, within the deliberative process of politics, Niebuhr views power as necessary to create a balance between order and justice within societies. Nevertheless, power must appeal to immaterial values, such as the law of love, to prevent justice from degenerating into order without justice (Niebuhr 1947: xii & 1996b: 276).

## **2.9 Conclusion**

Niebuhr's understanding of human nature shapes his views on the historical process in which humans live and act. He is however critical of most prevalent understandings of human nature. When mind, rationality, or spirit defines humans, their involvement in nature still confronts them. Conversely, when humans are related too closely to aspects of nature, they still need to account for their self-conscious and self-transcendent freedom. Niebuhr finds the answer to this problem of understanding human nature in the Christian conception of the unity of body and spirit, and of freedom and creatureliness. Any other views that neglect the contrasting aspects within human nature are not able to hold their ideas together as well as the Christian view do. The Christian view on human nature is for Niebuhr simply the most plausible and realistic understanding available to us.

When humans are understood in this biblical way, it is clear that God is revealed to them through the determined structures of nature, as well as in the freedom and consciousness of human spirit. The freedom of the human spirit, which transcends human reason and experience, allows deeper human insights and greater access to God. It is through God's

revelation that people can see themselves as they truly are. This exposition therefore makes it clear that humans are made in God's image and they are creatures. Niebuhr does not depart from this view. Throughout his work, Niebuhr continues to characterise humans with the capacity for freedom and for self-transcendence, yet inextricably finite in nature due to the fact of being created.

The combination of human freedom and creatureliness leads to sin - this manifests itself in the form of injustices in history. Importantly, Niebuhr is especially aware of the dangers of collective egotism in social behaviour. It is within this understanding of human nature and sin's social implications within history that Niebuhr makes his most original political and social statements. Niebuhr's interpretation of the limits of human nature as well as the possibilities within history form the basis of his political, social, and economic theorising.

He conceptualises human nature in detail so as to explain why injustices are prevalent within society. The injustices caused by individuals occur when people fail to understand their contradictory nature. Nonetheless, his aim is not solely to explain the reasons for injustices, but also to find better ways of promoting justice.

Even if Niebuhr was unclear on what justice should look like within societies, he plainly believed that justice is the degree of love that can be achieved under the conditions of human nature and sin where people have sought their own selfish interests. Niebuhr uses important principles such as equality and freedom as ways of determining the degree of justice prevalent within societies. He calls these transcendent principles, because although it may not be possible to achieve perfect equality or perfect freedom within societies and between different groups, any movement towards this goal is a step towards achieving greater justice.

Niebuhr, however, is not only concerned with the achievement of greater justice between individuals, but he is also interested in finding political solutions to the problems of social injustices. Achieving social justice requires political solutions that are based on the higher moral standard of love. However, political solutions are not absolute, with power

forming a crucial part of any political system. As will become evident in later chapters, Niebuhr regards the government as an important instrument to ensuring that the power between different groups within society is not disproportionate. He realises that there is a limit to social justice, because of the reality of the self-interested nature of different groups within societies. Nevertheless, he viewed politics and the organisation of society as a process, with the potential of creating greater social justice when informed by higher moral values. The following chapter will move beyond his views on social justice and will turn to his general views on politics and government, especially as it relates to alternative positions on the organisation of society.



## CHAPTER 3

### ORDERING SOCIETY: NIEBUHR'S CHRISTIAN REALISM

#### 3.1 Introduction

Even though Niebuhr was a theologian by training, he is probably best known for his theological and political views on the social ordering of Western societies. This interest of his led him on a search from liberalism to Marxist ideas, then on to the rejection of many of these Marxist ideas, before ultimately settling within a more conservative and realistic brand of liberalism.

This chapter will explore this journey of Niebuhr as he endeavoured to link his conception of human nature with the role of the state and the government in the promotion of greater social justice. From the previous chapter, it is clear that Niebuhr is very critical of modern views that repudiate or ignore the inherent problems within human nature, something he tried to rectify by presenting a more realistic conception thereof. This leads him on a quest to find the best ways and means of ordering society in light of this more accurate appraisal of human nature. In this quest he considers a wide range of social and political theories, from the most optimistic to the most pessimistic. What we will find is that Niebuhr wants to find a way of synthesising the optimism entailed in the liberal and Marxist views of the possibilities within history, with the pessimistic understanding of selfish human nature and its view on the limitations of politics. This synthesis is important in what is known as Niebuhr's Christian Realism. From this, Niebuhr wants to be able to present a more realistic approach to the possibilities and the challenges of promoting social justice throughout all of society.

This chapter serves as a contextualisation of Niebuhr's regard for democracy as an appropriate instrument for the promotion of greater social justice. Although his democratic views are only detailed in the following chapter, this chapter provides the necessary insights for understanding the broader social theory lens through which Niebuhr considered democracy.

### **3.2 Niebuhr's theory in practice: his social and political involvements and its influence on his political thought**

Niebuhr's thinking and works on social justice and social theory were deeply shaped by personal context and experiences. From a young age, Niebuhr showed a deep concern for issues of justice. He always appeared more interested in the moral and social programme of Christ than in the strong dogma of Christianity. This was already evident when his father passed away and he had to take charge of his father's ministry as a pastor from 1915 at the age of twenty-three. He began to secularise and naturalise his father's message by stressing Protestant liberalism, which incorporate modern thinking and developments such as science into the Christian faith. Liberal theology emphasises the human spirit, believing ignorance and natural impulse of humans are the causes for sin, and has an optimistic view of history and human progress in overcoming evil in the world. This liberal stance included studying the Bible critically and scientifically to analyse contemporary social conditions, as well as embracing religious optimism, individualism, categories of evolution, and emphasising ethics, the humanity of Jesus and tolerance. More practically, liberal Christians placed the focus on Jesus' humane teachings, instead of on miraculous events as a standard for the world. Through movements such as the Social Gospel prominent in the early twentieth century, liberal Protestants provided a religious rationale based on the Christian ethics for action against appalling social problems and social injustices (Bingham 1993: 84 & Patterson 1977: 21).

His studies in 1914 at Yale University, where the focus was mainly on using Christian theology to transform and change social structures, undergirded his liberal theology (Fox 1985: 23; Patterson 1977: 21). It was, nevertheless, when Niebuhr arrived at Detroit in 1915 as a young Yale graduate that his quest for social justice in particular began to change, develop, and shape. Detroit was a clear example of the time when industrialisation was booming in the US. He started preaching at Bethel's Evangelical Church and witnessed the maturing of the automobile industry in Detroit. Even though Detroit's Ford assembly line and mass production were characteristic of the US growth and industry at the time, it also exposed new strains and exploitations that emerged for

city dwellers. In the thirteen years that Niebuhr spent in Detroit, he not only witnessed Henry Ford's technical genius, but also the social circumstances, disparities, and injustices due to industrialisation. Not only did he witness the struggle between labour and capital in the industrial developments, but he also observed the racial injustices against Black immigrants from the South who came to seek better jobs in the new industrialising city (Bingham 1993: 160; Fox 1985: 90). This was a crucial time for Niebuhr in this quest for justice, because so many complicated social problems confronted him daily and played itself out in front of his own eyes. It impacted him deeply to the extent that the rest of his career can be viewed as a response to those issues he became aware of in Detroit. The injustices caused by modern industrial civilisation and capitalism overwhelmed him. He became deeply concerned about the concentration of power and resources in the hands of a relatively small wealthy class (Stone 1972: 24).

His young Christian liberalism and innocence were thus challenged during this time. He questioned the adequacy of his liberal theology, and reflected on whether liberal ideals were appropriate social perspectives and responses for dealing with social injustice. These doubts increasingly turned Niebuhr to social activism and politics.

During the 1920s, Niebuhr was still a pacifist – he believed in non-resistance instead of taking violent action. However, he was never a great proponent thereof, because he was too aware of the sinful human world and therefore regarded non-resistance as too much of an ideal (Fox 1985: 79). It was especially from 1925 onwards that his “mental horizon began to change” (Fox 1985: 90) as he became more familiar with the burgeoning industrial city. He shrewdly took a stance against the American culture of consumption and materialism, especially as it developed at the expense of factory workers. His strong criticism of this burgeoning industrial society made him a staunch advocate of unionisation in the automobile industry. But it was his acceptance of the chairmanship of Detroit's Interracial Committee in 1926 that was his first major step into his direct involvement in political issues. This formed the start of his career in secular politics (Brunner 1956: 30; Dorrien 2011: 226; Sims 1995: 170; Stone 1972: 31).

He increasingly occupied positions of leadership outside the church, which made him a more prominent figure among other leaders in the secular world. He, for example, started questioning and attacking the humanitarian pretensions of Henry Ford, while even seeking to promote the Labour Party as a third force within the US political system. His involvement in politics began to occupy so much of his time that some Bethel congregation members thought it was excessive. Even the church on Sunday evenings became a well-established arena for social and political debate (Fox 1985: 94-96). Importantly, his own social and political involvements shaped his ideas on social justice. His views were not only formed by abstract considerations of equality and fairness and other abstract reasoned arguments. Specific and local grievances directly impacted on his ideas, especially the appalling living and working conditions of the industrial labourers among which he lived and worked in Detroit. Whatever he was unable to answer theoretically, he did his best to answer practically (Lovin 1995: 209).

Therefore, in order to understand Niebuhr's political thought it is important to situate it within the context of the time when he became politically involved. His involvements between the late 1920s and early 1930s led to some of his most important writings on social ethics and social justice from the late 1930s to the early 1940s. Niebuhr's political involvements and political writings resulted in an increasing number of invitations to speak at events and organisations in and outside of Detroit. This elevated him as a public figure. In 1928, he became an associate professor of Christian ethics and philosophy of religion at the Union Seminary College in New York; yet he continued his political involvements. For example, in the 1928 presidential campaign, Niebuhr made it clear that he wanted liberal Protestants to put issues of social and economic justice ahead of issues of personal purity. He wrote about this mostly in essays and articles in the magazine called *World Tomorrow* (Fox 1985: 112-114; Sims 1995: 175). Furthermore, his involvements led him to join George Counts's left wing New York Teachers' Union, Norman Thomas's Socialist Educational Organisation, The League of Industrial Democracy, and University of Chicago economist Paul Douglas's League for Independent Political Action.

Niebuhr gradually moved further away from both his liberal ideals and his pacifism, to the point where he joined the Socialist Party in 1929. It was especially during the time following the Wall Street Crash and the then ensuing Great Depression of the late 1920s and early 1930s (which led to the suffering of large sections of society), that he became very critical of the unethical character of the US liberal society. He joined the Socialist Party because he believed that they represented a good mix between radical and responsible leadership, but also a middle way between liberals' ideas of reform and communists' ideas of romantic revolutionism. His political work led him to run for state assembly as a Socialist in 1930, and again in 1932 as candidate for Congress for the Socialist Party. He was unsuccessful but there was a clear shift in his thinking about the Christian responsibility within society. He also became more active in party circles, spoke at more gatherings, and offered political analyses to the readers of the Socialist Party's *New Leader* Journal (Fox 1985: 121; Paeth 2014: 46; Sims 1995: 180; Stone 1972: 66).

Coupled with this, his criticism of conventional religion and its approach of substituting philanthropy for justice grew. Niebuhr (1934: 127) suggests that:

... philanthropy combines genuine pity with the display of power and that the latter element explains why the powerful are more inclined to be generous than to grant social justice.

For Niebuhr, philanthropy may develop from a genuine desire by the wealthy to address injustices within society, but they often have mixed motives. The wealthy may give generously, but often they do so to justify and maintain the power and privilege they have within society. Even though Henry Ford's philanthropy extended to the provision of adequate wages to workers, Niebuhr challenged Ford's moral pretensions (Harland 1960: 234). He argued that it could never secure a balance of power between different groups in the political, social, and economic order of society (Niebuhr 1934: 129). Similarly, Niebuhr was outspoken about the limitations of the capitalist economic philosophy in ensuring greater social justice. He argued that the focus on individualism, as well as the

sentimentalism and pacifism informing both liberal theology and liberal culture, were inadequate for the achievement of greater social justice.

Niebuhr (1934: xii) believed that a more realistic understanding of the nature of power relations was necessary to grasp the difficult realities of achieving a just social order. During the early 1930s, he wanted to build a Socialist Party within the US. However, he became frustrated with the political naivety of Americans and the slow progress of their political maturity. He began to realise that the Socialist Party would also not be able to overcome this effectively (Bingham 1993: 163). What he wanted was a “political force that was realistic about power, committed to justice, sensitive to traditional loyalties, and humbly aware of its own temptation of self-righteousness” (Fox 1985: 170). But no such force existed. As explained in the previous chapter, Niebuhr viewed justice as a measure of balancing competing groups and establishing equilibrium of power within communities (Niebuhr 1996b: 256). Therefore, he believed that justice could only be institutionalised within a stable social order, and it is only when a social order is just that it can avoid disintegration (Niebuhr 1934: xx). In his view, only a third political party in the US could restore ‘social control’ within different groups in society and in government. He regarded neither the Democrats nor the Republicans as parties with the necessary expertise and social support to mobilise or enact “social insurance, public ownership of the major means of production, or the taxation of unearned wealth” (Fox 1985: 116).

Niebuhr (1934: 113) was thus disillusioned by the liberal American culture and he disapproved of the inequality and social injustices prevalent within society. He was also concerned about the immoral behaviour of groups within society. Even though his political thought on social justice and the ordering of society only came into its full in the 1940s, it already prominent from the 1920s and into the 1930s as he was grappling to find better ways of ensuring greater justice within societies.

Evidently, his political involvements engendered a stronger stance and bolder movements away from his initial beliefs. *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932) was a definite

break from his liberal philosophies as well as from his pacifist ideas. Here he makes drastic changes, and counters the liberal belief of pacifism and progress by now actually condoning coercion and violence if this was necessary in order to achieve the end of greater social justice. He wanted to overcome the “social inertia” and build a just society. Niebuhr no longer regarded liberalism and its faith in reason as the answer; even reason is a servant of specific interests in a social situation (Niebuhr 1934: xiv). He believed that society’s apathy to change required a “motive force” not found in the commitment to scientific reason. The intellectuals’ use of reason was insufficient in the social struggle – it would not bring about the necessary social change within societies. But he was careful with these statements, and emphasised that the use of violent or peaceful force depends on the unique context and circumstances of different societies.

Niebuhr’s (1934: 200) approval of the use of violence and force when necessary came as a shock to the liberal culture who believed gradual progress and peaceful means were the only ways of ensuring greater justice. He pronounced that the working class in the US should take stronger action against the injustices they faced, including a greater social struggle against the bourgeois culture in the US. Nevertheless, as Fox (1985: 139) points out, in *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932) Niebuhr assumed too easily that a class struggle is necessary, that it will be successful, and that it was something the American proletariat wanted. He did not take into account the cultural, ideological, and other factors that unified Americans. In other words, he assumed too easily that there would be a class-conscious proletariat in the US, and so he did not provide the best justification for violence as being an ethical resource. He rectified this in his later work, such as in his two volumes of *The Nature and Destiny of Man* in the 1940s, when his focus shifted away from his radical ideas that had been inspired by Marxist thinking.

Nevertheless, what made *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932) significant was the important step it took towards his later more realistic approach to political and societal issues. He did not think that progress in scientific expertise, education, or the liberal theology of Christian love was capable of displacing the impersonal mechanisms of modern capitalism. As he immersed himself in politics and in his writings, he realised

that perpetual peace and religious kinship were impossible ideals to achieve within societies (Niebuhr 1956: 62 & 1996b: 255). He did not have an explicit answer to the challenges within society and politics during the 1930s, but in a troubling time of political disarray and economic breakdown, he saw the need for reforming the structures of the public realm instead of reinforcing it. He regarded the world and societies as the realm of power and of differing interests.

During the 1930s, he attacked the liberal culture, its beliefs, and approaches to the problems facing society. As has already become evident above, Niebuhr embraced some of Karl Marx's ideas in this time. He started advocating revolutionary socialism in order to challenge the dominance of powerful groups within society more effectively. He also wanted greater balance and equality between different groups within society (Niebuhr 1934: 171). What is however evident, especially in *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932) where he focuses on the measures and the possibilities of achieving greater justice within societies, is that he still did not have a clear definition of the meaning of justice in his own thought. At this stage, he still did not have a concrete answer to the problem of injustice within society. He was, however, grappling with the problems and exploring the different alternatives to establishing greater social justice. It was only later on, especially in *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (1935) that he further developed and started to conceptualise his meaning of the term 'justice'. In this work, he provided greater clarity on his ethical ideal. It became clear that he was no longer interested in generating a potent proletariat; instead, he wanted to place greater responsibility on a political order stripped of some of its liberal confusions. He used the ethical framework of *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932) in *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (1935), but he was no longer interested in radicalism; instead, he provided a clearer understanding of his moral ethics which reflected his desire for a political order that would deal better with the disproportionate levels of power between different social groups.

The essential structure of Niebuhr's social ethics thus took permanent shape between the late 1930s and early 1940s; a time when he was also theologically most active. This creative period reached its apex with the writing of two volumes called *The Nature and*



*Destiny of Man: Human Nature* (1941) and *The Nature and Destiny of Man: Human Destiny* (1943). From the preceding chapter, it is clear that in these works Niebuhr views social justice as an important moral resource, which harmonises and reinforces a balance of power. It discriminates in order to prioritise the needs of a society, and so institutionalises moral demands of love. As explained earlier, he viewed justice as the measure within communities that provides a balance between competing groups and that establishes greater equilibrium of power (Niebuhr 1996b: 256). He writes:

Whatever may be the source of our insights into the problems of political order, it is important both to recognize the higher possibilities of justice in every historic situation, and to know that the twin perils of tyranny and anarchy can never be completely overcome in any political achievement (Niebuhr 1996b: 294).

From statements like these it becomes evident that Niebuhr had a problem with many of the modern views and explanations of the social orders within which societies could flourish (see also Niebuhr (1947: 7)). This criticism forms a central part of his work aimed at the promotion of greater social justice. In it he again uses important Christian insights, while taking into account the economic and social realities of the day, so as to explain why modern views on social order inadequately deal with the challenges of injustice in society and that they offer little in the way of true and lasting solutions (Niebuhr 1947: 86).

### **3.3 Niebuhr's appraisal of modern approaches to social order**

#### **3.3.1 The sentimentality of liberalism and the utopianism of Marxism**

From the previous chapter, it is clear that Niebuhr disagreed with many of the modern conceptions of human nature. He explained this in detail in the first volume of *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (1941) where he argued, as stated earlier, that these views distort the relationship and the understanding of two central elements inherently part of human nature: the natural and the spirit. These modern views are also inadequate, in that

they believe that human progress is possible within history, while not acknowledging the true nature and the extent of evil in humans.

Based on this contention, Niebuhr continues to criticise various modern views, most notably so in his work, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (1944), but here he focuses his criticism on modern perspectives on how societies should be organised. On the one hand he identifies an optimistic perspective. It is inherently optimistic or positive about human nature and the possibilities of progress within history, but Niebuhr (1947: 11) believes that their optimism is sentimental and will lead to both unrealistic and utopian ideals of how society should be organised. On the other hand there is a pessimistic perspective. It views human nature as inherently selfish, and is cynical about the possibilities of progress within history. Ultimately, Niebuhr criticises both these positions, but not without showing appreciation for some of their valuable insights on human nature and the organisation of society. Central to Niebuhr's (1947: xii) own argument is that, despite the insights gained from both the utopian and pessimist positions, neither outright optimism nor pessimism is capable of promoting or generating real social justice. Patterson (1977: 136) explains that Niebuhr tries to find both constructive and hopeful solutions in his quest for greater social justice by first destroying the illusions of other views, but without falling into the trap of finding absolute solutions that lead to idolatrous fanaticism. The first important critique of Niebuhr is of the optimism of liberalism.

### *3.3.1.1 Optimism of the first type: Liberalism*

Niebuhr's broad-ranging criticism of various contemporary positions on the ordering of society' needs to be understood against the backdrop of the societal changes from the feudal order to the modern society, and the values associated with these changes. Complicated historical changes caused and contributed to the transformation of medieval political life in to the modern state and culture. The changes that occurred and the emergence of modern civilisation brought about new and different conceptions of individuals, communities, history, and societies, as well as different types of political and

social systems. It was a time when the Renaissance culture explored a renewed interest in classical political ideas, such as Greek city-states and Roman law. It was also a time of consolidation of national monarchies in central Europe and the weakening of feudal traditions and customs. This led to the emergence of European political thought that was preoccupied with the nature and limits of political authority, law, rights, and obedience (Hague & Harrop 2010: 21; Held 1989: 12; Heywood 2007a: 90).

The movement away from the medieval feudal system thus resulted in a transformative period for European institutions. This was also expressed in other countries, for example, America's Declaration of Independence in the eighteenth century, was a way of securing human freedom in revolt against political and ecclesiastical absolutism and aristocratic rulers of that time. Evidently, modern culture – as a bourgeois ideology for the middle classes – grew from the struggle of the commercial classes against the powers in the medieval feudal world. Liberalism became the democratic protest against a feudal society to remove traditional forms of restraint and to promote individual liberty (Stone 1972: 40).

Furthermore, the industrial era gave rise to a distinctly modern age. The Industrial Revolution, that took place from the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries, increased productive capacity through the division of labour and through shifting the focus from families as the productive unit to working away from home. It consequently placed a stronger emphasis on the individual as the productive unit (Bentley & Ziegler 2011: 660; Knowles 2008: 3). The developments that took place within modern civilisation also changed people's perception to that of being freethinking people within society. Events such as the American Revolution (1778) and the French Revolution (1789) reinforced this perception. In *Two Treatises of Government* (1689), John Locke made a significant contribution when he defined people's fundamental rights as equality with others being sovereign rulers over themselves. The theme continued with other philosophers and political thinkers, such as John Milton, John Stuart Mill, Edmund Burke, Tocqueville, Benjamin Constant, Voltaire, Montesquieu, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. The US Bill of Rights incorporated, and gave expression to many of their ideas (Stone 1972: 36).

Simic (2008: 198) summarises this gradual change to modern culture in terms of a new set of beliefs and practices:

[It] encompasses the belief in the triumvirate of Reason, Progress, Truth; the rational planning of ideal social orders; and the standardization of knowledge and production that takes Man as the norm for understanding – in short the European Enlightenment project.

This gradual transformation eventually crystallised into scientific and instrumental rationality, secularism, individualism, and the bureaucratic nation state (Bennett 2008: 212; Haferkamp & Smelser 1992: 13). Developments towards the modern age also included new and different political movements and political philosophies, particularly liberalism.

This new modern culture became closely associated with liberalism, for central to liberalism, and fundamental to modernity, is the idea of the autonomy of the individual, which literally means the self-rule of the individual. This refers to the idea that autonomous people are rationally self-willed and can determine their own lives because of their independence of external authority (Heywood 2007b: 445). The political reality of autonomy is usually expressed within liberalism. Accordingly, liberalism emphasises the importance of the individual and individual freedom. Politically, this usually implies that the state and the government are limited from interfering in the private sphere of individual and civil society, which includes family and business. Liberalism gradually became associated with freedom of choice in daily life, such as marriage, religion, economic and political affairs. Liberalism upholds values such as reason and toleration as opposed to medieval values of tradition and absolutism. The purpose of liberal politics is then also to protect and enable the rights of individuals as autonomous agents. Practically, this means that mechanisms are put in place for ensuring that individuals are able to pursue their interests. These mechanisms include a constitutional state, private property, and a competitive market economy. Furthermore, liberalism celebrates the individual's right to "life, liberty and property" (Held 1989: 13).

Niebuhr's engagement with, and assessment of, liberalism, as a broad cultural movement, forms a very interesting and complex aspect of his intellectual development. Stone (1972: 35) describes this relationship well when he depicts Niebuhr as a liberal, and yet also as one of its most ardent critics.

In his early writing, as is evident in *Does Civilization Need Religion* (1927), Niebuhr advanced a decidedly liberal theology which demonstrated his support for general liberal ideas. This was within a particular cultural milieu and intellectual climate of American Protestantism, which peaked in America in the 1920s and 1930s (Harland 1960: 44-46). As a student, he embraced many of the key characteristics shared by the different types and conceptions of liberal theology. These include its emphasis on the authority of experience, the continuity within history, as well as history's dynamic nature. In effect, liberal theology places a high value on the possibilities of evolutionary development of nature, history, and societies. Additionally, they place confidence in human reason, as well as emphasise the importance of ethics and a person's social environment. All these characteristics emphasise the development and actions of individuals as autonomous people who are rationally self-willed and capable of improving society due to their autonomy and ability to determine and make decisions that could positively impact society.

Even though Niebuhr valued these ideas, he later became critical of the way in which the liberal theology devalued the authority of Biblical scripture. Instead, the liberal approach was to investigate the Christian faith historically and scientifically, while focusing on the humanity of Jesus and the importance of tolerance towards others (Stone 1972: 36). This consequently led to the Social Gospel Movement, which regarded the law of love as something that people should live by to achieve greater cooperation and turned a blind eye to the likelihood of coercion and class struggles within society (Niebuhr 1956: 153). He struggled with the sentimentality of liberal theology and its view that love was a simple historical possibility. He argues that the love principle becomes irrelevant in liberal theology's attempt to achieve relevance in social and political issues. Niebuhr

(1956: 182) views moralism (as evident in modern liberal Protestantism), as sentimental about the moral values in political life. He believed that this could be attributed to liberalism's ignorance of the depth and power of sin, as well as to its inability to understand the contradictions within humans. He thus regards it as a superficial reading of the human condition. Instead of founding the human condition on the inherent problem of humans – which makes it impossible to achieve the law of love – liberal theology assumes that people do not fulfil the law of love because they have not heard of it often or clearly enough. They also fail to appreciate the complexity of the Christian religion. Together with this, liberal theology lacks political and social realism, because it fails to understand the depth of humans' plight, or the way in which love transcends all ideas and achievements of humans (Niebuhr 1956: 196).

Nonetheless, Niebuhr's focus on liberalism extended beyond liberal theology. Liberal theology was crucial in the development of his further political thought, but from this, he was able to identify the same mistakes made by liberalism as a broader cultural movement. For instance, in *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (1944), Niebuhr engages with the ideas of some of the important theorists within secular liberal thought, such as John Locke, Adam Smith, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Thomas Paine, Jeremy Bentham, William Goodwin, Johann G. Fichte, and G.W.F. Hegel. He groups these liberals together, despite all their differences, because of the similarities of their solutions to the problem of self-interest within societies. Whether through Locke's social contract, Smith's invisible hand, Rousseau's social contract, or Fichte and Hegel's synthesis of national and universal interests, Niebuhr believed that all these different liberal theories placed too much faith in human reason and underestimated the power of self-interest within society (Niebuhr 1947: 22).

Before further elaborating on Niebuhr's criticism of liberal views, the valuable insights that Niebuhr gained from the different schools of thought within liberalism deserves brief consideration. Niebuhr (1947: 3) appreciates the dynamic conception that liberals hold of history. Liberals recognise the novelties of history, and are incredibly enthusiastic about the possibilities within history and of finding meaning within historical processes. This

insight also contributes to modern liberal culture's promotion of freedom and liberty within political communities. This freedom is what makes the risk and the effort of politics worthwhile. An important principle of individual freedom in liberalism is not the freedom humans have by nature, but the freedom they create by consent. What this means is that people will agree to moderate their own desires, because they do not want to infringe on others' freedom or allow others to infringe on theirs. Government then needs to ensure that this happens and that offenders who infringe on others' rights are restrained. Lovin (1995: 171) summarises Niebuhr's views in this regard well when he writes that Niebuhr regards this freedom as necessary within a political community of consent. This is when individuals know what they want but they do not want it excessively, which allows for rights based on mutual consent. These rights are ensured when the powers of the rulers are diffused and limited through constitutional restraint, to act in the interest of protecting the liberty of people.

Niebuhr thus recognises the valuable insights gained from liberal culture's political views on freedom, but he is also mindful of the errors made by the secular liberal culture. Niebuhr (1947: 66) criticises the liberal faith in human reason and its optimistic view of humans' inclination to goodness. Nevertheless, Niebuhr did not discount reason for reason also played an important role in his political thought. He, nevertheless, objects to the liberal overreliance on reason since it believed that individuals would always act in a rational way. It also assumed that a higher or universal law exists, and that the harmony of a universal good can encourage self-interest. In effect, liberals argue that the political and economic restraints on people should be limited. This view is based on negative liberty, where the state is constrained from interfering in individuals' lives as far as possible. Which means that an absence of external restrictions or constraints on the individual exists – this allows them to do whatever they choose, provided they do not interfere with others' freedom (Heywood 2007b: 31). But Niebuhr protests against the liberal assumption that humans will use rationality for the betterment of all within society. Instead, Niebuhr (1947: 68) argues that this is a dangerous claim to make since individuals tend to use their freedom to monopolise their own political and economic power. In other words, he argued that reason cannot be expected to control the selfishness

contained within the economic and political power of individuals and groups. Moreover, what Niebuhr tries to show is that unlimited freedom in the hands of individuals leads to a disregard for the interdependence of individuals within a society. Callen (2001: 9) argues that Niebuhr implies that minimal restrictions on individual freedom would make it difficult for the needy to find assistance, because welfare or social programmes in a liberal political system would be insufficient and without the necessary checks on the powerful groups within society.

Essentially, Niebuhr (1996b: 166) argues that secular liberalism places its faith in the redemptive power of history – it is fervent about the creative powers of humankind within history. Given that liberals regard history as dynamic, as the carrier of meaning, and that it holds the power of fulfilment of meaning, they regard evil within history as something to overcome. Consequently, they believe that evil can cause interruptions to progress in history, but that evil will not cause humans to fall into the same cyclical pattern of history where all progress is constantly erased. The reason for this is that liberals believe history has the capacity for its own fulfilment and redemption, making progress inevitable. Niebuhr (1947: 138) explains that liberals believe that human ignorance causes injustice and other forms of evil; therefore, measures such as education and the enhancement of knowledge are integral to the betterment of society. Liberals also accept that civilisation is gradually attaining higher morality and that the character of individuals- rather than that of social systems and arrangements – is central to the promotion of justice within society. Overall, Niebuhr was critical of liberal beliefs that knowledge will overcome human selfishness and greed within society, and that mere appeal to love, justice, goodwill, and kinship will result in the promotion of greater social justice.

To summarise, even though various interpretations and positions within the liberal culture exist, they all agree that humans largely exists in the realms of harmony and order. Liberals postulate that it is possible to overcome challenges such as political anarchy, economic depression, and social chaos with, for example, education and reformed institutions. However, Niebuhr (1947: 17) disagrees with this and regards these errors as



a legitimate threat to the survival of democracy and the promotion of greater social justice. Ultimately, he argues that liberalism is too optimistic in their evaluation of human nature, and presents an untrue reflection of both the greatness and depravity of humans. In effect, they believe that evil can be overcome; however, they do not realise that evil is inextricably bound to human freedom. Niebuhr argues (1947: 2) that the upcoming middle class, the main driving force of liberal culture, is unaware of its own corruption. They are mostly unaware that human self-interest is an inherent part of their human nature. The problem with the focus on excessive individualism and the liberal optimistic evaluation of human nature became more evident in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries' struggles over inequality, and the resulting conflict, imbalances of power, and wars. He believes that these events occurred mainly because the middle class mistook their own progress for the progress of the world. Niebuhr argues that optimists, such as the liberals, did not fear the power, ambition, and collective egotism of the community, because they were unaware of the perils caused by human nature in its quest for greater progress and justice within societies (Niebuhr 1956: 13). Their views led to sentimental ideals. Niebuhr was especially critical of liberal sentimentality over a constitutional liberal democracy. This sentimentality reduces the role of the state and government's power to minimal proportions in the interest of the individual protection through the constitutional principles of democratic government. But he believed that minimal restrictions on the individual were a danger to communities as it allowed too much freedom to the individual to act to the detriment of others (Niebuhr 1947: 5).

Together with the optimism of liberalism, Marxism (although one of the strongest oppositions against the liberal culture and its detrimental effects on others) are also overly optimistic about ordering society.

### *3.3.1.2 Optimism of the second type: Marxism*

The growing inequality and injustices prevalent within the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as well as the difficulty of reconciling social equality with the preservation of individual liberties, gave rise to alternative positions to liberalism, most prominently

views that emanated from the works of Karl Marx (1818-1883) and Friederich Engels (1820-1895). Marx and Engels rejected capitalism, liberalism and liberal democracy and revolted against the liberal culture and its bourgeoisie middle class. In their view, at the centre of exploitation and injustice, were the political-economic structures based on class, which led to the systemic domination of one group over another.

Marxism is radical in its approach, and attacks the capitalist system of industrial and modern western societies. It blames the capitalist class system as the reason for economic, social, and political inequalities, resulting in the exploitation of the proletariat, or working class. It further argues that the capitalist system is based on structures of subjugation, discrimination, exploitation, and privilege of elites. The elites dominate the working class through their economic control of the means of production, as well as their political domination and power. Marx held forth a radical response to this situation which aimed at transforming the capitalist system into an egalitarian society through revolutionary means (Held 1989: 12; Heywood 2007a: 10). Marx and Engels developed a complex and systematic set of theories to explain the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism and the socialist society that will be put in its place following this overthrow. From this set of theories, socialism developed as an alternative model of an economic and political system. It strives to be a better alternative to capitalism; values social equality and cooperation over competition; and encourages membership of social groups and collective bodies. It also emphasises greater social ownership of the means of production and greater cooperation in managing the economy (Heywood 2007b: 99).

Marxist theory played an important role in Niebuhr's political thought, most notably during the 1930s in his work *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932). Even though Niebuhr never fully embraced Marxist ideas, he used some of the socialist principles that emanated from Marxists' thought. His teacher, Douglas C. Macintosh at Yale University initially influenced Niebuhr's socialist ideas. Furthermore, during the 1920s, Niebuhr saw the negative implications of industrialisation and the industrial struggles in Detroit on workers, which continued to shape Niebuhr's socialist views. During this time, Episcopal Bishop Charles D. Williams became a mentor and guide to Niebuhr in Detroit. The

Bishop was passionate about creating awareness of the social and economic conditions of workers and advocated for greater strides towards justice and social reform. Williams greatly influenced Niebuhr's views on justice as an important moral value in the Christian faith and the gospel of Jesus. They also campaigned together for guaranteed annual wages and other benefits to workers. These were important strides towards more socialist reforms (Brown 2002: 24 McCann 2001: 9). But it was only with the disastrous consequences of the Great Depression from the late 1920s to the early 1930s, that he started to focus profusely and formally on socialist ideas (Bingham 1993: 113 & Stone 1972: 88).

Niebuhr was impressed with the Marxist analysis of the unequal and exploitative capitalist system that liberalism created, as well as their depiction of the destruction of Western civilisation. Initially, in his earlier works, such as *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932), he used Marxism as an important platform to criticise the liberal culture. What he learnt from Marx was that the claims for morality often reflect the self-interest of a particular group or individual, even though he could never agree with Marxism that this was based solely on economic and class interest. Marxism also argues that the bourgeoisie never considered the dangers of group egotism and the inevitable conflict between the disposed and the possessor. Furthermore, Marx's doctrine of alienation and his political realism, influenced Niebuhr's political ethic in conjunction with his biblical doctrine of sin (Stone 1972: 88).

It was through Marxist ideas that Niebuhr could provide a clearer explanation of history as catastrophic. Marxism also shaped his judgement as to the policies that will be required to promote greater social justice. Niebuhr did later move away from Marxist ideas, but they continued to influence his ideas, as is evident in his later views on the just organisation of society, such as in his insistence on some public ownership and central planning (Stone 1972: 79).

Notwithstanding his sympathy for some Marxist ideas, Niebuhr (1947: 58) was mainly critical thereof and later placed the errors of Marxism in the same category as liberalism.

He was highly critical of the utopian and revolutionary aspects of Marxism, which envisioned an equal society without injustice and competition. After the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, Lenin wanted to create a communist state based on Marxist principles. Niebuhr witnessed this unfolding of Communism before, during and after World War II (1939-1945), and concluded that Marxism was inadequate as a political philosophy; it could not be achieved practically in the form of a political institution (Platten 2010). Niebuhr observed how Communism in Soviet Russia led to a party dictatorship in favour of small elite at the expense of the majority of people within the country. For Niebuhr it was clear that Marx was unable to predict the rise of an oligarchy akin to what happened in the Soviet Union. Niebuhr argued that Marx did not anticipate this because of similar mistaken assumptions as those of liberals. Marxism also did not fully understand the inherent problem of human nature (Niebuhr 1947: 115).

Niebuhr thought that Marxists were seemingly unaware of the trivial differences between the liberal faith in progress and the Marxist belief of establishing a utopian society after the class system has ended. Both led to injustices, because they underestimate the perils to progress due to their inherently flawed understanding of human nature. Together with this, they also fail to understand the dangers of claiming that the answer to society's problems of injustices lies with some universal ideal or utopian society (Niebuhr 1947: 59). Niebuhr asserts that even though Marxism criticises the liberal excessive focus on individuals, it is still based on the wrong assumption that property is the root of evil in capitalist societies (Niebuhr 1947: 115). This assumption leads to the idea that the destruction of capitalism and the end of the state will lead to a new classless society where all will live together collectively and equally, while disregarding the dangers of the collective to the freedom of others. Niebuhr saw this as utopian, sentimental, and unrealistic, and that it consequently leads to injustice because the problem is not with property but with human nature. This flawed nature is not something people can escape from; instead, they have to acknowledge it. In essence, Marxists' hope was to find solutions within the historical. But their hope was misplaced and utopian. They tried to find easy solutions to complicated problems within society, based on a superficial view of humans and underestimating the power of human self-interest.

### *3.3.1.3 Liberals and Marxists – birds of a feather*

With the above in mind – and considering the different perspectives within modern culture on achieving greater social change – it is necessary to reiterate why Niebuhr found both liberal and Marxist views problematic. Even though Niebuhr praised the modern culture for its high regard for the individual, he was always aware of the fundamental errors made by liberals and Marxists alike. The excessive individualism of liberalism, as well as the excessive collectivism of Marxism and its false idealism of change after the fall of the bourgeoisie, troubled him. Niebuhr (1947: 7) explained that both perspectives were too confident in “the possibility of achieving an easy resolution of the tension and conflict between self-interest and the general interest”. Furthermore, he argues that the relationship between the individual and the community reveals the problems of the age he lived in. In the modern era, the individual comes from the community ties of traditional societies. However, the technical advances made in the modern era forms a new relationship, which in turn forms a different kind of cohesion not prevalent in previous communities. Modern civilisation either places too much hope in individual freedom (such as liberals), or in the community through collectivism (such as communism) as the solution to the conflicts within the modern era.

Together with this, Niebuhr appreciates the modern views’ dynamic conception of history, but he objects to the excessive credit that they give to the growth of humankind’s power and freedom over history. Equally, modern views identify freedom too closely with virtue without understanding the paradoxes that this freedom brings into history. He argues that whenever we mistakenly conceive of history as its own redeemer, we can easily make serious political misjudgements that will lead to some unattainable utopia as its end. One of his biggest complaints against the different modern views is captured in his following statement:

But no man asks how it is possible that an essentially good man could have produced corrupting and tyrannical political organizations or exploiting economic organizations, or fanatical and superstitious religious organizations (Niebuhr 1947: 17).

Most of the modern views locate the source of the problem outside of human nature and within social institutions. The danger with this notion is that when people fail to realise that the source of evil is within them, they become self-righteous – this in turn leads to political blindness and legitimises injustices (Niebuhr 1996a: 204 & 1947: 17).

This interpretation ultimately leads to one of the most important claims that Niebuhr makes about the errors of liberalism and Marxism. His main concern with the different schools of thought within the modern culture is that most of them reject the Christian doctrine of original sin – they consequently regard humans as inherently good and harmless. He asserts that liberalism and Marxism have an “erroneous estimate of the dimensions of the human stature” (Niebuhr 1947: 18). He argues that those who are excessively optimistic about human nature and history, too easily accepted reason as the means to ensure that humans will behave more justly (Niebuhr 1947: xi). Whatever they place their hope in leads to sentimental and utopian ideals. Modern civilisations’ social optimism leads to idealistic and simplistic resolutions to the challenges facing society, because they make the wrong assumptions about human nature. He emphasises that there is no way, order, aspiration, or level of moral or social achievement in which there is not some corruption of inordinate self-love (Niebuhr 1947: 17). But because modern culture rejects this belief, they look for immediate causes in some form of social organisation whenever they are confronted with humanity’s self-love. Liberalism and Marxism blame political institution or economic organisation for this problem, or they blame it on ignorance while waiting for a perfect educational process to redeem humans. The bottom line is that they are too optimistic and blind to human nature. Liberals and Marxists are, therefore, overly optimistic and disregard the negative aspects of humanity and the threat it poses to the exploitation of others within society (Niebuhr 1947: 20).

To put this in another way: Niebuhr terms these utopian views the “children of light” since they are “those who seek to bring self-interest under the discipline of a more universal law and in harmony with a more universal good” (Niebuhr 1947: 10). He also calls them “foolish children of the light” for thinking that a universal good exists when it

is always situated within a specific context and in favour of a specific interest group (Niebuhr 1947: 9). Therefore, understanding human nature, as explained in the previous chapter, will help to understand that humans are not entirely rational, and that self-interest is part of humans – it is a powerful force and essential to human nature. He argues that those who have been able to obtain power will try to maintain their power, whereas the powerlessness of other factions will make it more difficult to deal with inequalities – it will eventually increase the gap between the different factions even further. They propose a solution to the problem of anarchy and chaos within communities, but this will ultimately fail since the view of human nature on which this solution is built is inaccurate and superficial (Niebuhr 1947: 11).

Niebuhr's quest for social justice always remained a fundamental part of his life and his work, but evidently, he found liberal and Marxist ideals of organising society inadequate. From the preceding chapter it is clear that Niebuhr aims at a realistic appraisal of human nature, which for him includes a recognition of human sin and corruption, while stressing the all-important need for justice and love in this world. He was, as noted earlier, not entirely cynical about the possibilities of progress within history because of his own views on the *impossible possibility* of love in the social structures of justice, but he, nevertheless, felt very strongly about the perils of utopian views, especially in relation to social justice. He searched for a better and more realistic analysis of human nature to inform his own conception of justice and the organisation of society.

### **3.3.2 Pessimism**

Niebuhr's (1947: 41) criticism of the universalism of the “children of light” was contrasted with another group, which he called the “children of darkness”. He argues that, since the “children of light” underestimate the realities of power and self-interest in socio-political affairs, they make a grave mistake by assuming too easily that self-interest can be brought under a higher law. Instead, he argues that they should learn from the “children of darkness” without yielding to their dangerous cynicism. Learning from the “children of darkness” could help them to “beguile, deflect, harness, and restrain self-interest, individual and collective, for the sake of the community.”

The “children of darkness” are also referred to as pessimists by Niebuhr mainly because of their excessive pessimism about human nature and history, and their cynical view of politics. Those who are pessimistic about human nature have views very different to the liberal culture and they consequently attack liberalism, especially for its belief in a universal law that will promote and ensure greater possibilities of progress and goodness within societies and politics. These cynics argue that no strong nation should acknowledge a law beyond its own strength – for them no conception of a higher law other than their own will and strength exists. In their view, those who are optimistic about human nature and the possibilities of progress in history and politics, underestimate the power of self-interest. Niebuhr regards these pessimistic views as largely ‘evil’ because it condones uncontrolled power, which is a peril to justice. He does however regard some aspects of this view as wise and realistic because of its understanding of the power of human self-interest and self-will (Niebuhr 1947: xii).

Niebuhr turns to many prominent philosophers and thinkers in his effort to explore this pessimism. Three in particular impacted his own thinking. These are Thomas Hobbes from within the secular tradition, and Luther and Augustine from within the religious tradition. In the previous chapter, their conceptions of human nature were considered, but their views on the state and organisation of society also impacted Niebuhr deeply.

As is evident from the previous chapter, Hobbes (1952: 84) views life as “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” Under these conditions, Hobbes realises that life is dangerous and people need protection from each other. This leads Hobbes to conclude that, in the words of Heywood (2007a: 437),

... the core purpose of government is to govern, to rule, to ensure stability through the exercise of authority. This, in turn, requires that government is able to perpetuate its own existence and ensure the survival of the broader political system. System performance can thus be judged on the basis of criteria such as longevity and endurance, as the simple fact of survival indicates a regime’s ability to contain or reconcile conflict.



Hobbes's conception of the state is one that is absolute, with unlimited power that cannot be challenged nor questioned. He argues that this absolutism of the state is necessary as a crucial means to secure stability and order, and to avoid anarchy (Heywood 2007a: 93). From this, Niebuhr draws valuable insights. He believes Hobbes realised something very important about the limits of human reason, since it can never be completely detached from the narrow and selfish interests of the individual or the collective (Niebuhr 1947: 43). This shows the importance of a political organisation that establishes order in light of the dangers of human selfish motives. However, Niebuhr (1996a: 106) regards Hobbes as excessively pessimistic, because Hobbes's motive for establishing order was always aimed at suppressing the ever-present possibility of anarchy, without seeing the possible contribution that governments could make in the promotion of greater social justice. Instead, Niebuhr argues that Hobbes's excessive focus on conflict and anarchy, as well as order through power, leads to political absolutism and the use of force to control societies (Niebuhr 1996b: 258).

Similarly, within the Christian faith Niebuhr (1996b: 258) regarded Martin Luther as excessively pessimistic. He argues that Luther never paid much attention to a person's social life within a particular historical setting. Instead, Luther was preoccupied with the freedom he experienced through God's redemptive grace and placed almost all of his focus and emphasis on eternal life. Luther paid little attention to human participation in politics, or the possibilities within history. However, Niebuhr argues that, similar to Hobbes, Luther was very aware of the selfishness of humans. As a result, he realised the importance of having a strong civil power that would restrain the powers of those whose greed and rebellion would otherwise harm the unprotected and innocent. Similar with Hobbes, Niebuhr argues that Luther viewed government merely as a way of keeping order within society, but he did not regard government as a possible avenue to rectifying injustices within societies (Niebuhr 1947: 44 & 1996b: 191).

Together with the above-mentioned views, Niebuhr draws key ideas from Augustine's political and social philosophy. In the two volumes of *The Nature and Destiny of man* (1941 & 1943), Niebuhr provides a revised Augustinian theology of history. Augustine's

realistic understanding of the self-interested nature of humans largely shaped Niebuhr's (1996a: 264) ideas on the organisation of society. For example, Augustine believed that the initial intention of God's creation was for humans to live in harmony and in equality with others. However, because of the entry of sin into the world, human nature was corrupted to such an extent that spontaneous social cooperation became impossible. Under these circumstances, humans are filled with self-love and the desire to rule and control. For this reason, the state is needed to provide controls and boundaries to ensure that humans do not destroy each other. Since Augustine did think that humans should be left to their own devices, the state is a worldly mechanism that holds human destructiveness in check (Adams & Dyson 2007: 25).

Niebuhr largely agrees with Augustine's views, which contributed to the development of Niebuhr's political realism. Niebuhr appreciates Augustine's realistic view of the selfishness of human nature and its perils to political achievement in the organisation of societies (Niebuhr 1996a: 264). For Augustine the state was never intended to be a moral community. Niebuhr commends Augustine for his understanding of evil as part of human nature and the dangers of individual and collective egotism. Augustine believed it is important to become involved in politics – not for the possibilities it might unlock – but to restrain evil while pursuing higher aims that are unrelated to politics and to this world. Moreover, he appreciates the uniqueness of events in history and finding meaning within the process, but he reserves final meaning for the judgement of God (Niebuhr 1934: 69 & 1956:127). Niebuhr believes that in the face of selfish interests of individuals and groups, Augustine's perspective is a reminder that no formulae for justice exist; humans will always be corrupted, which means tensions and competitions within societies will always be prevalent. Understanding this helps us to find more realistic ways of establishing peace and justice under the conditions set by humans' inherently selfish nature.

Essentially, Hobbes, Luther, and Augustine argue that the average person does not have the capacity for self-governance, because by nature people cannot be trusted with large aggregates of power. Evidentially, Niebuhr (1947: 44) regards Hobbes, Luther, and Augustine as examples of theorists who accurately identify the selfishness in people and

the danger of anarchy due to humans' inherent nature. Yet, this leads to unconditional approval of state power, which is dangerous as it often leads to oppressive and tyrannical rule by the government. These pessimistic views are thus adamant about using the state as a tool for ensuring order against the dangers of human self-interest, but without placing checks and balances on the rulers who are just as self-interested. One of its greatest mistakes, according to Niebuhr (1947: 43), is that the uncontrolled power for achieving order and unity within societies lies with the state or ruler, but that the pessimism that informs this does not then apply to the ruler also. Niebuhr did not think justice could flourish under conditions where those who maintain order are not held in check, because the possession of power, especially when it is irresponsible and uncontrolled power, becomes one of the greatest sources of injustice (Niebuhr 1947: xii). Moreover, pessimists, he believed, never acknowledge the necessity of also placing sufficient checks on communities, which in turn endangers the rights and interests of the individual. The national community is identified with the universal, but this does not recognise that "... the nation is also an egocentric force in history ...", which means it claims "... a too unconditioned position in relation to the individuals and to the subordinate institutions in the national community" (Niebuhr 1947: 45).

Overall, theorists such as Hobbes, Augustine, and Luther acknowledge the need and the importance of government. They particularly regard government as an important force that restrains evil. For them, a strong government is required that has the power to suppress all the rivalries to maintain the peace of the community (Niebuhr 1947: 44). Together with this, pessimists are sceptical of the indeterminate possibilities within history, but they still acknowledge the importance of politics as a process through which to create communities. Niebuhr (1947: 43) explains that part of this process is the creation of political units within specific geographical areas where people often share their beliefs and have similar commitments. For this reason, Niebuhr believes that pessimists also regard the existence of government as an achievement, for it ensures that the needs of the community are met and that people are safe and secure within those boundaries. More specifically, in Christian thought such as Augustinian and Lutheran perspectives, government is the power necessary for order even though it is alien to faith.

They understand that there is an obligation to obey secular rule or sometimes to serve as ruler, judge or executioner, but it has little relation to the service of faith. For them, as Lovin (1995: 196) explains, government and politics remain an unavoidable evil that acts as reminder that the world without government would simply mean that the world would be even worse off.

Even though Niebuhr agrees with the pessimistic views of human nature and of the need for government to ensure order, he was not as cynical in his view of the possibilities of history and politics. In fact, he criticises these views for their emphasis on order at the expense of justice, and for failing to make the discriminate judgements to achieve approximate levels of justice within societies. He argues that pessimistic views fail to acknowledge the positive functions of state and government (Niebuhr 1947: 118). Overall, Niebuhr (1947: 48) was searching for the most appropriate way of organising society to promote social justice. He clearly agreed with the pessimists that the problem of inherent selfish human nature must form part of any debate about the organisation of society, and that people should not expect too much of political activity. Yet, he was more optimistic than the pessimists about the type of governmental system, arguing that government can and should be more than the keeper of order.

Niebuhr (1947: 44) describes government functionally – and more positively – as a way to:

... guide, direct, deflect and rechannel conflicting and competing forces in a community in the interest of a higher order. It must provide instruments for the expression of the individual's sense of obligation to the community as well weapons against the individual's anti-social lusts and ambitions.

Niebuhr (1947: 43) argues that pessimists “saw the destructive but not the creative possibilities of individual vitality and ambition and appreciated the necessity, but not the peril, of strong government.” Their great emphasis on strong government suppresses

rivalries to maintain peace of the community, but this does not lead to the promotion of greater social justice.

It is from these insights and errors of the pessimists and optimists that much of Niebuhr's own views on the organisation of society developed. As will become evident in the next chapter Niebuhr (1947: xii) strongly supported democracy as being more virtuous than any other systems of rule, exactly because it places checks upon the power of the ruler and administrator. In this he however, advocated for a model of democracy that goes beyond the narrow and minimal principles of liberal democracy's excessive focus on the protection of the individual. In order to explore the reasons for his support of democracy, it is, however, first necessary to explain how he used and synthesised aspects of both the pessimistic and the optimistic views into his own thought, while simultaneously attempting to avoid the mistakes they made. This synthesis was most clearly expressed in Niebuhr's Christian Realism which crystallised within his thought during the 1940s.

### **3.4 Niebuhr's synthesis – Christian Realism**

Niebuhr's theology has always been central to understanding of his views on justice and how society should be ordered. His theology, in turn, was influenced by social and political experiences which shaped it into a philosophical perspective which he called Christian Realism. In Niebuhr's quest to find a political system that would promote greater social justice, he uses Christian resources – mostly biblical and Augustinian sources – to reconnect liberalism with its origins in the political traditions of Christianity (Lovin 1995: 170). He, therefore, synthesises modern liberal thought – emphasising the virtue and self-sufficiency of people with infinite possibilities of progress in history – with a more realistic approach to human nature and the limits to history. He is thus able to use the insights of the liberal possibility of indefinite moral improvement, together with the insights from his Reformation background that highlights the limits to any final victory of good due to human nature. He concludes that good does not overcome evil in history but grows alongside it to the end. The reason for Niebuhr's synthesis of these almost opposite viewpoints, is that he believes this would lead to a greater understanding

of human life in the course of history as it faces new possibilities of good and evil (Niebuhr 1996b: 212).

Christian Realism signifies that progress is possible, but that the inherent selfish nature of humans' remains a peril to progress made in history. Niebuhr synthesises these opposing ideas because he is interested in compromise and pragmatic choices within society, rather than theological or ideological purity (Lovin 1995: 168). Weber (2002: 341) explains this well when he writes:

Any theology that has as robust a notion of depravity as Niebuhr's necessarily must have an equally robust account of human possibility. Realism lies somewhere in the middle between the hope of heaven and hope of humanism. It begins with a realistic conception of human nature that never considers the inevitability of human depravity apart from the indeterminacy of human possibility. You can never say just one thing about human nature because it is predictably evil and surprisingly good.

Niebuhr's Christian Realism is about the awareness of "the realities of human sin and corruption but, nonetheless, heeding the imperative for justice and love in this world" (Miller 2014). It includes responsible engagement and political commitment from government as well as individuals and groups within societies so as to address social and economic problems.

Niebuhr appreciates the need for striking a balance between the self-importance of an individual and the need for individuals to function within a larger community. For him, community serves a valuable purpose, since individuals can only realise themselves through the community (Niebuhr 1947: 4). He argues that achieving the highest reaches of individuality is dependent on finding fulfilment in the community. Nevertheless, he also realises that the community can frustrate individuals, since loyalty to the community and self-sacrifice mean that individuals are limited in their accomplishment potential, due to the restrictions imposed on them by the community (Niebuhr 1947: 48). It is from Niebuhr's understanding of human involvement in history that he is able to make important conclusions about the characteristic essence of communal living. Niebuhr

views communal life as something that is imposed on people to come to terms with the numerous enemies that they face. It is, however, also a social necessity, because it is through relation with the community that individuals can realise who they are. He thus regards the organisation of people within communities as both positive and negative. For him, life has indeterminate possibilities that we are obligated to try to fulfil, but progress is always limited due to selfish human nature. Similarly, he links this understanding of life to the social processes within society, and regards these social processes as dynamic forces within history (Niebuhr 1947: 4 & 1996b: 253).

It is evident from the previous chapter that there are limits to the possibilities of progress to be made in history. This also highlights the need for rules, laws, and systems as a way of organising societies. These rules, laws, and systems also govern social relations as instruments of community and of mutuality within societies (Niebuhr 1996b: 259). Niebuhr, therefore, does not refute that progress from generation to generation is possible, and in fact argues that communities have increased in breadth and extent due to human freedom and transcendence over nature. Yet, unlike utopian views, he cannot imagine reaching a time of irrefutable progress in history. For him, there is always a chance that the sinful nature of humans may corrupt progress (Niebuhr 1996a: 254).

As discussed in the preceding chapter, Niebuhr explains that human self-transcendence makes self-giving and caring for others possible and cause them to feel a sense of obligation and mutual love for others (1996b: 254). This both affirms and limits their individual aspirations to the larger whole. It also binds people together. However, due to the human will-to-live, people also have a strong will and a desire for their own power and glory. Since humans are more than the natural, they not only desire this power for physical survival, but also for prestige and social approval. Hence, people want to avoid the perils that stand in their way of gaining this power. Niebuhr then also regards human pride as the greatest sin in this quest to gain more power. He observed how the will-to-power places humans in conflict with others when he writes that, “[t]he conflicts between men are thus never simple conflicts between competing survival impulses. They are

conflicts in which each person or group seeks to guard its power and prestige against the peril of competing expressions of power and pride” (Niebuhr 1947: 20).

Nonetheless, Niebuhr believes that individuals still have a capacity for self-transcendence and to consider the interests of others above their own, whereas this is more difficult to achieve among groups (Niebuhr 1934: xi). As explained earlier, Niebuhr believes that the powerful groups dominate the weaker groups within society because of the selfishness of groups, which ultimately creates a massive disequilibrium of power. He was concerned that it is more difficult to achieve greater justice among groups, since the behaviour and the pride of individuals are accentuated and more severe in a collective, because a collective does not feel the same degree of judgement and contrition as what an individual feels. He explains that groups within society have a tendency to choose their own interests above the interests of others and so they often act immorally towards other groups within society (Niebuhr 1934: 9). In *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (1944) he writes that “human desires [that] are expressed more collectively, are less under the discipline of prudent calculation, and are more the masters of, and less limited by, natural forces ...” (Niebuhr 1947: 24). In other words, this tendency of people to be more concerned about their own group interest results in the dominance of some groups over others with almost unrestrained egoism (Niebuhr 1934: 1). Where group interests are involved, the determination of justice usually deteriorates into the mere calculation of one group’s advantages over another. This in turn leads to the adherence to minimalist definitions of justice (Niebuhr 1934: 26; Niebuhr 1996b: 259).

With this in mind, Niebuhr’s quest was to seek an appropriate means to address the dangers of group behaviour and prevent the domination of some groups over others. Previously, in *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932), Niebuhr had been more interested in addressing the problems of groups’ self-interest, as well as in finding a greater balance of power against the dominant and more powerful groups through revolutionary force. His views changed and became less radical between the late 1930s and early 1940s, but the idea of a balance of power remained an important element in his further work. He supported the idea of creating an equal balance of power between different groups, but



felt that a better understanding of human nature and the dangers of power and domination should inform this balance. For this reason, he wanted a more realistic approach to the organisation of societies that would limit dominance, power, and exploitation of some groups over others, while promoting greater social justice among different groups within societies.

In light of this, Niebuhr tries to find some political means to address the dangers of group interest and domination. He argues that a need for political organisation exists, but as explained in the previous chapter, it can never be as perfect as the ideal of love (Niebuhr 1956: 62). He explains that higher possibilities of justice are possible within societies when informed by *agape*, but it is still only an approximation of this ideal love and always under the condition of sinful human nature. Therefore, political decisions about what should be in place within the political organisation of society to promote greater justice must accept these limits. *Agape* cannot be a historical reality and human self-interest will always affect all political achievements. That is why Niebuhr is adamant that people must be more realistic in their attitude towards power. Nothing can change the character of humans, which means that no social organisation, or attempts to perfection, can change this reality or eliminate injustices. Niebuhr (1996b: 256), therefore, wants a realistic compromise between the balance of power within societies. Since people are unable to live within social and political organisations based solely on moral or rational ideas (Niebuhr 1947: 3).

Overall, Niebuhr is trying to show that political achievement towards greater social justice is possible, but only when the inherent problem of human nature is taken seriously. Moreover, he illustrates how it embeds within a deeper understanding of the progress and perils to the development of societies within history. Niebuhr realises the importance of having a political system that is more than just the keeper of order, as pessimists would argue. Conversely, it should also not be a political system that finds its ultimate hope in some ideal political or social system, as the utopians would argue. Instead, greater social justice requires something different, and this is why Niebuhr is

trying to find a balance between the opposing positions. He thus provides his views on politics as it relates to his understanding of human nature.

In Niebuhr's thought (see Niebuhr (1947: 3), for example), his idea of freedom plays an important role in understanding how, through politics, it is possible to create a political system prone to the promotion of social justice. He is not only interested in the freedom that politics creates. He is also interested in the freedom that forms an essential part of human nature. From the previous chapter, it is clear that Niebuhr views freedom as transcendent over the structures of nature, yet freedom is still bound to human finiteness. This has implications for the way in which societies should be organised. Understanding the limits of freedom is important in changing the way in which people understand the possibilities of politics. No opposition between freedom and nature exists, but freedom should never become the ultimate or universal goal, or absolute achievement for humans. Lovin (1995: 178) explains that in Niebuhr's thought, politics becomes an integral part of dealing with the possible dangers of human self-interest. Nevertheless, politics is also precarious. It is through politics that people will willingly relinquish some of their freedom; yet, it is also political power that is capable of victimising, oppressing, and destroying some at the expense of others. From this, it is clear that Niebuhr recognised the possibilities within politics without placing his hope in politics as a final solution to human problems.

For Niebuhr political organisations consist of legal enactments, which include both conscious and unconscious constructions of communities. It is never simply the construction of laws and rules of government through consciousness or reason; it also includes unconscious interactions of social life, such as underlying tensions to the attainment of life and power (Niebuhr 1996b: 267). Power governs all communities. They are essentially dependent on the coercive and organising power of government, as well as the equilibrium of power derived from the balance of different groups and forces in any given social situation. A need for order exists, and power is an important measure to achieve order. According to Niebuhr (1996b: 268), there are various ways of managing the balance of social forces in a community so that the highest possible justice may be

achieved. This is why Niebuhr (1996b: 276) viewed government as the important keeper of order and promoter of social justice.

Since the desire of groups and individuals to secure their own needs and interests can lead to corruption, it is important to restrain humans by force. This is where Niebuhr values pessimistic views, because their understanding of selfish human nature makes them realistic about the need for order through government. Government is a vital force and political organisation within societies, because some groups need to be restrained from dominating over others. Government has the moral authority and physical power capable of doing this (Niebuhr 1996b: 274).

However, as explained earlier, Niebuhr did not think that the only role of government was to be the keeper of order within societies. He also regarded government as an organising centre, required to arbitrate conflicts from a more impartial perspective than the parties or groups involved in the conflict. Government should steer tensions away from violent conflict through the management and manipulation of laws and rules for mutual support, but then instituting coercive power when arbitration and composing conflicts fail. Niebuhr, however, asserts that government must seek to redress the disproportions of power by consciously shifting balances where injustices exist. Government is also a social necessity, because we are relying not only on a balance of power among groups, but also on an organising centre to regulate power. Groups are more concerned with power than with individual morality, which means that justice becomes a question of continual adjustments of group claims, and government is the way in which to enforce these adjustments (Niebuhr 1996b: 276).

Nevertheless, because of self-interest, even government's measures to achieve order can easily fall into the domination of powerful groups over others. Each of the principles of power he identifies, namely organising power and the balance of power, contains the possibility of contradicting the law of goodwill. The organising principle of power can easily degenerate into tyranny and it can create a coerced unity in which individual members are impaired. This will also always leave the balance of power pregnant to the

possibilities of tyranny and anarchy. Since Niebuhr (1996b: 277) was alert to the limits of politics, he was also wary of government itself, since it always runs the risk of becoming corrupted by specific interest groups. A group may use government's power to position their own interests above that of others. One part of society may dominate over the rest of society, and maintain this dominance by destroying vitality and freedom in the name of order. Niebuhr argues that even government can obscure their partial interests and claim it to be unconditionally valid. Those with power do not necessarily have to use force to dominate and subdue others. They can just use the resources they have together with reason as a calculating force to dominate others. The government is thus an ambiguous force that brings about order, but it is also inclined to corruption and must be held in check by society to ensure that it does not overstep its boundaries.

Niebuhr thus advocates for politics that affirm human freedom, without neglecting the realities of power and self-interest in the formation of communities. The understanding of human life as being both good and evil, and embedded in the course of history, also led him to believe that politics was an instrument of proximate goals, rather than ultimate commitments. Niebuhr wanted to combine the liberal hope of incremental gains in justice, with a realistic assessment of human nature and human involvement in history. Lovin (1995: 188) summarises Niebuhr's view on politics well when he writes:

Politics is about more fundamental freedom than the set of liberties which a government grants or the constraints which it must impose to insure that persons can exercise their freedom under conditions of reasonable security. Politics begins with the capacity for indefinite transcendence of present circumstances. Politics is involved in every aspect of human life because it is only in political activity that the freedom that characterizes human beings can be realized in the forms that are more substantial and permanent than flights of imagination or intellectual abstractions.

### **3.5 Conclusion**

Niebuhr's own quest for social justice informed his views on the organisation of society as consisting largely of a synthesis between opposing perspectives, including optimistic

and pessimistic views on human nature and government. This synthesis was a product of his deep reflection on this topic, and also his own social and political activism.

From early in his career Niebuhr became politically and socially involved in issues facing societies. His views gradually changed and shifted from liberalism to Marxism to Christian Realism. Throughout his views were always informed by a much deeper desire to address the injustices prevalent throughout society. He always remained receptive to different ideas, as long as it brought him closer to finding the most appropriate political means of addressing social injustices. Throughout his quest, he aimed to find an appropriate political system that both considers the selfishness of human nature and that is realistic about the self-interest of individuals and groups within the organisation of any society.

Niebuhr valued the important contribution of pessimistic views on human nature and their scepticism of the possibilities of progress within history. However, he did not want to fall into the same cynical trap – history simply proved that within limits, progress is possible. He was thus searching for a balance between these pessimistic “children of darkness” and overly optimistic “children of light”. He believed that promoting greater social justice, requires a political system that can uphold a better balance between the self-interest of humans and the just organisation of society and politics.

Overall, Niebuhr thus views politics as an instrument that can be used to draw closer to love but under the conditions of sinful human nature. Government has the power to ensure that there is order within societies to restrain human power. But government should also act as arbitrator of conflict since it has the legitimacy to address disproportions of power between competing groups and adjust different claims of groups. Nevertheless, government power must also be checked since it runs the risk of becoming too powerful and therefore abusing its power. Politics can thus be seen in more positive terms as an instrument that affirms human freedom without neglecting the realities of power, and it becomes an instrument of proximate goals rather than ultimate commitments.

Niebuhr, more specifically, tries to find a political system that is able to 'meet this criteria' on politics and it is here that he turns to consider democracy and its appropriateness as an instrument for the promotion of greater social justice. His views on democracy will be explored in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER 4

### NIEBUHR'S UNDERSTANDING OF DEMOCRACY AS INSTRUMENT AND PARTIAL SOLUTION FOR THE PROMOTION OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

#### 4.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, it was made clear that Niebuhr views the role of government as the keeper of order, and also as an instrument for the promotion of social justice. This understanding follows readily from his views on human nature, history, justice and social justice as explained in chapter two. We have seen that Niebuhr criticises optimistic and utopian ideals for their views on how to ensure that justice is distributed more fairly and equally among different groups within society. Through this he was searching for more realistic ways in which the organisation of government and society would generate greater social justice. In this search he found democracy to be a valuable instrument, but the democratic model he had in mind differed from the liberal democratic model prevalent within the US with its prominent focus on individual freedom. For Niebuhr democracy could be an important model for the promotion of greater social justice, especially if seen in the light of the important religious values and insights which informed all of his thought.

This chapter will focus on Niebuhr's view on democracy. His view on the liberal values which have become enshrined within liberal democracy is of particular note. This chapter will thus distinguish between his support for liberal democracy and his criticism thereof. He supported important liberal democratic values such as the protection of the individual against the misuse of government power, but he was at the same time disappointed with the lack of depth that informed the liberal culture and with its approach to the organisation of society. These limits to liberal ideals became abundantly clear to Niebuhr as he considered the problems of cultural and religious pluralism, ethnic and race relations and general economic well-being within large and diverse modern societies.

In light of these problems and concerns, he provides an intellectual defence of democracy against the excesses of extreme liberal individualistic views, which he believes undermines what is at the heart of democracy. Although democracy is but a partial solution, he sees it as a valuable instrument for organising society and one of the best forms available to us. The chapter will start by explaining why Niebuhr viewed democracy as necessary in light of human freedom. Secondly, it will highlight his views on the task of democracy as conducive to social justice. Thirdly, it will describe the political structures and processes that Niebuhr envisioned would provide the necessary balance between human freedom and order. The close correlation between this view of Niebuhr's on democracy and more recent social democratic views will also be highlighted. The last portion of the chapter will reflect on the importance of Niebuhr's Christian resources in the promotion of social justice through democracy.

## **4.2 Niebuhr as democrat**

From the preceding chapter, it is clear that Niebuhr grew up in an environment where he was exposed to largely liberal ideas within a predominantly liberal culture. Niebuhr's own thinking develops from what he observed in the context of the USA as a liberal democratic state and government. Furthermore, it is also clear from the previous chapter that Niebuhr was disturbed by the growing inequalities between the different groups within society (Niebuhr 1934: 142-168). This, in light of his theological understanding and deep convictions, compelled him to look for a way of addressing this. Niebuhr was critical of liberal views, nevertheless, his liberal background and context contributed to shaping and developing his own views on democracy. It was within this liberal democratic setting that he grew to appreciate democracy as an appropriate instrument for the organisation of society, but the democracy he appreciated differed from many of the liberal view of democracy. From the commencement of *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, Niebuhr affirms his support for democracy as “a valuable form of social organization” (Niebuhr 1947: 1). He even asserts that,



[i]deally democracy is a permanently valid form of social and political organization 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, as well as to the common necessities of all men (Niebuhr 1947: 3).

His appreciation of democracy can be linked directly to his views on human nature as discussed in greater detail in chapter two, specifically to his claim that humans are "essentially" free and since this freedom is inherently part of them, they also require freedom in their social organisation (Niebuhr 1947: 3).

Niebuhr believes that, "[a]n ideal democratic order seeks unity within the conditions of freedom; and maintains freedom within the framework of order" (Niebuhr 1947: 3). Freedom is as important to the community as it is to the individual; and the individual requires order as much as the community. The reason why Niebuhr thinks freedom and order should be maintained in a necessary balance, is because humans need that freedom as it is part of who they are essentially, but their freedom is also a danger to others. Democracy can provide an important framework in which there is a balance between freedom and order for both individuals and communities. But how did Niebuhr arrive at the conclusion that democracy is valuable as a form of organising society? In order to get to his conclusion about democracy, it is necessary to first understand his views on liberal democracy.

### **4.3 Niebuhr, liberal culture and liberal democracy**

Niebuhr (1947: 1) refers to liberal democracy as a "bourgeois ideology" in that it mainly represents the viewpoints of the middle classes, or bourgeoisie, who played such a significant role in the establishment of Western liberal democratic societies. Bourgeois ideals developed from the commercial class's challenge against the power of the ecclesiastical and aristocratic rulers of the feudal-medieval world. The bourgeois middle class challenge against rulers of the feudal system led to demands for greater individual freedom. This gradually led to greater representation and plurality within society, as well

as, the space to deal with differences and diversities in peaceful ways both in the interest of individuals and society (Niebuhr 1947: 2).

As a result, the bourgeois liberal focus on the individual shaped the liberal democratic organisation of society in the interest of protecting the individual. In chapter three, this principle was explained in more detail. The idea of autonomous people who are rationally self-willed and can determine their own individual lives because of their independence of external authority increasingly started to impact the way in which people thought about organising societies (Heywood 2007b: 445). Over time, these values infiltrated into the economic and political structures of European societies. Politically, this meant that restrictions were placed on the state and government to curtail them from interfering in the private sphere of individual and civil society, including political and economic life, celebrating individual rights to “life, liberty and property” (Held 1989: 13). Consequently, it led to the gradual change towards greater promotion of pluralistic and free societies. Values that were decidedly liberal in nature, that is, that were aimed at the enhancement of individual freedom, were promoted in liberal democratic societies through, for example, the establishment of constitutions, the rule of law, limited government, regular elections, universal suffrage, civil rights and liberties, fragmentation of the power of political institutions, political equality, and market independence from state interference. Niebuhr believes that these values and institutions were valuable as it promoted individual freedom, which is an inherent part of human nature (Niebuhr 1947: 1).

#### **4.4 Niebuhr’s criticism of liberal values and liberal democracy**

Niebuhr (1947: 3) supports the liberal value of individual freedom as well as the liberal democratic institutions that promote the protection of individual rights. Nevertheless, he also provides a penetrating criticism of liberalism because of its excessive focus on the individual. In chapter three, it was mentioned that Niebuhr saw the need for realising both the self-importance of individuals and the need for individuals to function within a larger community. He thus saw the need for a balance between freedom and order for both the

individual and the community. But he argued that liberal democratic societies focussed too excessively on individual freedom and this poses a threat to groups and communities within societies.

He starts his criticism by presenting a strong argument against the liberal belief in the goodness and rational capacity of humans. He argues that this is one of its greatest mistakes. Since it places so much emphasis on a political system that focuses solely on the individual and promoting individual rights, the general welfare of society becomes secondary. The previous chapter explained in more detail Niebuhr's concern that the liberal culture disregards the importance and necessity of the community since it places such a high value on the optimistic evaluation of human nature and too excessively emphasise the importance of the individual. Since liberals reject the Christian doctrine of original sin they make "erroneous estimate of the dimensions of the human stature" (Niebuhr 1947: 18). As a result, their solutions are sentimental and do not sufficiently deal with the maintenance of both freedom and order for both individuals and communities to flourish freely without exploiting others (Niebuhr 1947: xi).

In the previous chapter it became apparent that Niebuhr thought of the liberal focus on individual freedom and independence as dangerous, since too much freedom allows for small and powerful elites to increase their power and privilege at the expense of larger society. Harland (1960: 165) explains that Niebuhr argues that liberal culture's estimates of human nature and human history were not sufficiently justified in view of contemporary experiences of the time. He saw in Detroit the rise of industrialisation and the excessive materialism and capitalism of the liberal American culture. The amount of individual freedom allowed to individuals within the liberal democratic structures of government led to a strong capitalist elite, and then to the exploitation of different groups and classes and to great inequality of social and economic power. Liberal democracy provided individual freedom to individuals but there were no social programmes in place to protect those groups that suffer under the brunt of others. It was, therefore, too individualistic and led to a system where government and politics were in the interest of a small wealthy group at the expense of the rest of society. Against this backdrop, Niebuhr

(1934: 114) notes that a political system with an excessive orientation towards individual freedom can lead to a sense of superiority of some over others. Inevitably, greater exploitation by those in power undermines incentives for organising society collectively, since they act in the interest of a small group but at the expense of larger society. This has as an effect, an unjust society and system of government where power is centralised in the hands of a few. Those in power take advantage of those without power which leads to further unethical behaviour, increasing levels of inequality, and further exploitation.

Niebuhr also feared that the socio-economic and political inequality between different groups would lead to greater instability within society. The instability was confirmed for Niebuhr by the growing working class within Detroit who had to live and work under appalling conditions; the levels of instability in times such as the Great Depression; and the further challenges and threats from ideological alternatives like Marxism and Communism against liberal democratic ideals (Lovin 1995: 173; Rice 1993: 218). Accordingly, one of Niebuhr's greatest concerns was that liberalism was so closely linked to democracy that the rejection of liberalism will also lead to the rejection of democracy. This he feared would lead to other and more dangerous ways of dealing with political and societal challenges (Niebuhr 1947: x).

For this reason, he was afraid that if democracy was not going to be understood in its purer form and without the excessive liberal influences, it would easily be lost as a valid and important way of ordering society and government. He feared that the continuation of liberal optimistic estimates of humans' moral capacities and associating this with democracy will later lead to the discarding of democracy altogether. In other words, he wanted to find a new cultural basis for democracy, other than the bourgeois culture (Niebuhr 1947: 5).

Niebuhr therefore tries to carefully and clearly illustrate the 'shallowness' and limits of liberal ideals, especially as it informs liberal democratic societies. He does this by specifically emphasising three difficult factors that diverse and large societies must deal

with but which modern liberal culture cannot deal with effectively. These are cultural and religious pluralism, ethnic and race relations and economic challenges.

#### **4.4.1 Cultural and religious pluralism**

Niebuhr first focuses on cultural and religious pluralism since it is such a basic source of conflict which all democratic societies have to deal with. All religions aim to find answers to the questions of the meaning of life, but different religions have different ultimate sources of moral standards (Niebuhr 1947: 125). Niebuhr notes that the diversity of views and answers to final questions of the meaning of life, in effect, make it challenging to find answers to proximate issues of moral order and political organisation. He believes that another challenge is that those within societies with similar views move closer together and away from mutual contact with others with different views. This becomes a peril to a community that shares diverse views. He argues that it is especially dangerous in societies where those who are in power try to overcome religious diversity through forceful means and impose unity of culture and religion over the entire society. In contrast, Niebuhr explains that liberals try to achieve cultural unity through the “disavowal of traditional historical religions” (Niebuhr 1947: 129). They promote a secular state where no single religion will gain official political status within a society, and try to achieve a much greater degree of tolerance between different religions within societies. Cultural unification of the community is based on “a ‘common faith’ embodied in the characteristic credos of bourgeois liberalism” (Niebuhr 1947: 129).

However, Niebuhr asserts that this is based on religious indifference – a shallow unity and not sustainable in the longer term – instead of on religious humility. Religious indifference is not sustainable because it is based on the bourgeois assumption that freedom for all religions will eventually lead to the gradual dissipation of religious convictions except for the secularised bourgeois versions of them. It, furthermore, assumes that uniformity will be achieved through “‘men of good will’ who have been enlightened by modern liberal education” (Niebuhr 1947: 131). He argues that the secular bourgeois assumption of the good-will of humans and their unrealistic belief in the

enlightenment of humans, does not appreciate the different and various cultural and religious convictions growing from different historical situations. Instead, he believes that democracy should promote a true and deeper sense of diversity, respect and tolerance for different religions and cultures.

#### **4.4.2 Ethnic and race relations**

Secondly, Niebuhr argues that these same mistakes filter through to ethnic and race relations. As explained in chapter three, liberals place their confidence in the possibilities within history, and believe that progress through, for example, increased education, will cultivate greater respect for other ethnic and race groups, and the resultant acceptance of diversities. However, Niebuhr does not believe this is possible since liberal culture does not fully understand the dangers of racial pride that leads to racial prejudice. And, in fact, liberals make their own standards the final norms of existence due to their pride, and judge others when they fail to conform to liberal values (Niebuhr 1947: 139). He warns that liberal irrationality “presents a perpetual hazard to group relations and makes frictions between groups an inevitable concomitant of group existence” (Niebuhr 1947: 140). Instead, he advocates for a democratic society where ethnic and race groups are able to acknowledge their own racial pride, but also their own limits, in order to cultivate greater respect and tolerance towards other ethnic and racial groups.

#### **4.4.3 Economic challenges**

Lastly, although liberal democracies promote political equality, Niebuhr argues that this does not necessarily lead to economic equality. Even though he was not a proponent of complete substantive equality between people, he was very critical of the excessive individualism within liberalism that gave rise to such high levels of inequality between different groups within society. He believes that the selfishness of some groups within society leads to domination and further economic exploitation over other groups, despite the promotion of political equality in liberal democracies (Niebuhr 1947: 146).

This can best be illustrated through his views on property within liberal democratic societies. Niebuhr argues that the bourgeoisie view property as an instrument of justice but neglect that property is an important source of power within societies, which can be used irresponsibly and lead to greater levels of injustices. He was unimpressed by private ownership that included narrow reforms on property within liberal societies in the interest of protecting individual freedom since it does not sufficiently address inequality of power between different groups and limits progress towards greater equal justice. For Niebuhr, it was very clear that liberal values did not establish greater economic equality between different groups, but in fact led to greater inequalities, exploitations and injustices. Those with property normally have more economic power than those without property. He argues that the bourgeoisie's economic power is linked to its political power. Liberal democracies promote political equality, which gives the power of suffrage to more groups, and they are thus able to place greater pressure upon economic society due to their growing power within the political society (Niebuhr 1947: 88). Notwithstanding, he asserts that the greater political power acquired by different groups within liberal democracies have not always led to significant changes in the equality and distribution of economic power and property amongst different groups (Niebuhr 1947: 98). He argues that private ownership means power to the owners of property to block attempts to equalise the distribution of income between those with and those without property. Property owners are thus in control of political and economic affairs which largely promotes their own interests. Beckley (1992: 219) explains that Niebuhr was critical because property owners have the economic and political power to prevent progressive reforms in favour of those without property such as regulation, taxation, minimum wages and striking action for workers. Property owners prevented reforms by claiming that it is an abridgement of property rights. For Niebuhr, this is not what a democratic society should present. Liberal societies focus on protecting the individual's interests but it is at the cost of others. This is not democracy, but merely a way in which some elites and powerful groups benefit. A true democratic society is much more representative of different groups within society, politically as well as economically.

Through these criticisms, Niebuhr tries to expose the failure of liberal democracies to promote key values, such as plurality, diversity, representation, tolerance, respect, participation, equality and inclusiveness of different religious, cultural, ethnic, race and economic groups within society. Although these are important values within liberal democratic theories, Niebuhr argues that in practice liberal societies do not adequately promote these values. That is why he searches for a much deeper and stronger understanding of democracy for the establishment of true democratic societies.

#### **4.5 Niebuhr on the necessity, task, and structure of democracy**

*The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (1944) is Niebuhr's major treatise on democratic political theory and it is here that he expands most elaborately on his democratic ideas. In this work it is quite apparent that he is a supporter of democracy, but also that he tries to steer democracy away from some of the excesses of liberal democracy and to provide it with a deeper justification than the preferences and interests of bourgeoisie culture. He does this through his Christian realism. He begins by stating:

The thesis grew out of my conviction that democracy has a more compelling justification and requires a more realistic vindication than is given it by the liberal culture with which it has been associated in modern history (Niebuhr 1947: x).

He argues that liberal values promoted within liberal democratic societies do not adequately reflect a political system that “seeks unity within the conditions of freedom; and maintains freedom within the framework of order” (Niebuhr 1947: 3). It is based on shallow ideals with a too excessive focus on the individual at the cost of the community. Together with this, liberal values do not take seriously human nature and the perils it creates for the organisation of societies.

On the one hand, he criticised the existing liberal democratic organisation of society, but on the other, he viewed democracy as a better solutions than the existing liberal model. Harland (1960: 166) explains that Niebuhr's aim was to disassociate the core of democracy from the prejudice of bourgeois culture and history, and ground it in a more



realistic understanding of human nature. It must always take into account man's freedom and sinfulness. Therefore, in *Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, he states:

The preservation of the democratic civilisation requires the wisdom of the serpent and the harmlessness of the dove. The children of light must be armed with the wisdom of the children of darkness but remain free from their malice. They must know the power of self-interest in human society without giving it moral justification. They must have this wisdom in order that they may beguile, deflect, harness and restrain self-interest, individual and collective, for the sake of the community (Niebuhr 1947: 41).

His political philosophy and specifically his views on organising society is informed by his Christian view of human nature because he believed it was more adequate for the development of a democratic society than, "either the optimism with which democracy has become historically associated or the moral cynicism which inclines human communities to tyrannical political strategies (Niebuhr 1947: xiii). He proposed a political philosophy for a free society that aimed at correcting the illusions of optimistic views forming such an integral part of the bourgeois culture. He therefore departs from the optimistic liberal democratic views of human nature and argues that democracy can actually be stronger when it has a more secure and realistic understanding of humans.

Together with Niebuhr's search for a more realistic democratic theory, he also wants to impart a new moral understanding of how government, as well as public life and policy, is to be organised, in light of this realistic democratic theory, all with the aim of promoting greater social justice. Since there are many moral flaws within secular and liberal democracy and individualism, he endeavours to find a moral basis for democratic governance built upon moral values different from those focused on individualism within liberalism.

Niebuhr addresses these matter quite substantively, in fact, Harland (1960: 164) states that "Niebuhr has written an immense amount about the presuppositions, philosophy,

aims, and functioning of an open or democratic society.” Throughout all of this, however, his thinking is directed at three focus areas, namely the necessity, the task, and the structure of democracy. These three focuses will accordingly structure our exploration of his views.

#### **4.5.1 The need for democracy**

The beginning of this chapter briefly mentioned that Niebuhr (1947: 3) believes that an ideal democracy does justice to the spiritual stature of humans, as well as to their social character. He promoted a democratic system that deals realistically with the dangers of the self-interest which is inherent in human nature because of human freedom. Throughout, he does promote freedom for individuals because humans are essentially free, but he is also aware of the dangers of excessive freedom to individuals in light of the perils caused by people due to their inherent selfish nature. He believes that the bourgeois culture assumed too easily that the primary focus should be on individual freedom, and that community and social order is merely there to ensure that there are minimal restrictions to avoid confusion and chaos. But Niebuhr argues that both the individual and community require freedom because it allows humans to express their essential freedom both individually as well as collectively. For him, collective forces are just as important within the organisation of society and require the same amount of freedom as individuals (Niebuhr 1947: 4). Moreover, the order of community is just as beneficial for the community as it is for the individual. Unlike the liberal focus on the necessity of order for individual freedom, Niebuhr believed that order is necessary because individuals can never know themselves if they live in isolation of others. Human freedom is best expressed within the order of a community. Therefore, both the individual and the community need equal amounts of order and freedom; one should not be at the expense of the other.

For Niebuhr, this balance is necessary because it promotes freedom but it also constrains the amount of freedom for individuals and communities. Especially, since absolute power of the ruler suppresses freedom which is an essential part of humans. But he argues that it

was just as dangerous to allow individuals' excessive freedom since human self-interest is a threat to the freedom of others (Niebuhr 1947: xi). Niebuhr is searching for a political system that can deal effectively with the problems of order and freedom. He does find it in democracy but in a democracy that acknowledges the necessity of constraints on individuals, groups and rulers. Many liberals blame social institutions for the evil within societies, and believe that the way to solve it is through addressing these challenges through reason and progress, as discussed in chapter three. But Niebuhr believed that this is part of the problem since liberals shift the blame to external or outside factors, whereas they should rather realise that it is human nature that causes the evil within societies and against others. Instead of trying to 'fix' institutions, humans should first understand their own nature in order to find better solutions to the problems of balancing order and freedom within societies (Niebuhr 1947: 17).

In one of his most famous quotes, Niebuhr states that:

...modern democracy requires a more realistic philosophical and religious basis, not only in order to anticipate and understand the perils to which it is exposed; but to give it a more persuasive justification. *Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary*" (Niebuhr 1947: xi [emphasis added]).

Niebuhr thus believes that humans do possess a capacity for justice. His belief in human capacity is largely based on his own theological understanding of human nature. Niebuhr believes that humans have the capacity for "indeterminate transcendence over the processes and limitations of nature" (Niebuhr 1947: 3). Since humans have the capacity for indeterminate freedom, they are also aware of indeterminate possibilities. For democracy to work, or any social harmony for that matter, it is necessary to be aware that there is some transcendence of the self over self-interest. In chapter two the possibilities and limits were explained in more detail in relation to history. Despite sin and human limits, progress within history is still possible, making humans capable of acting justly and doing justice to others (Niebuhr 1996b: 212). Justice for Niebuhr, also as explained in much more detail in chapter two, is informed by the link he makes between *agape* and

justice. As explained, Niebuhr calls the relation between love and justice a '*impossible possibility*' (Niebuhr 1956: 61), because even though love can never be fully realised within history, it remains relevant because human beings are judged by it. He describes love as possible because humans are able to affirm others, the world, and themselves as meaningful parts of a universe created by a loving God. This is part of their nature as free and transcendent beings. Human freedom allows for greater achievements of justice and Niebuhr insists that, as explained by Rice (2009: 125):

... biblical faith provides the most profound grasp of both the indeterminate heights and depths of the self-transcending freedom. In terms of the indeterminate 'heights' of the self's freedom, democracy, by maximising liberty, affords the self the greatest latitude for the creativity that is an expression of that freedom. Democracies provide for a measure of openness, freedom, and flexibility that allow for an expansive elaboration of individual and collective vitalities...

In Niebuhr's words, the expansive elaboration of individual and collective vitalities possible due to democratic freedom, therefore, rises "in indeterminate degree over all social and communal concretions of life" (Niebuhr 1947: 49). Democracy provides the freedom in which people are able to achieve greater levels of justice.

Nevertheless, democracy also requires a more realistic approach to the limits of progress of humans within history. It remains impossible to fulfil this moral ideal of love completely, since people will never be able to organise their lives according to *agape*. Even when human intentions may be good, their expression of love will always fall short due to the inherently sinful nature of humans (Niebuhr 1956: 62). Therefore, the dangers of humans' sinful nature make democracy necessary. Democracy is necessary because the problem of human nature is inherent – there will be no time in history that this will be overcome, which also means that injustices within societies are inevitable. Due to these dangers, democracy provides the necessary constraints against the selfish interests of individuals, groups and leaders within societies, since there are important checks and balances within democratic societies between different and competing groups as well as

within government. These checks and balances will be explained in detail in the section on the structure of democracy.

Coupled with this, Niebuhr (1947: 151) believes that a democratic system can only work if individuals, leaders and communities have a greater humility so as to deal with the self-interest of humans. He fears that the idealistic and optimistic views of human nature are not aware of their own corrupted nature and cannot see the ingrained self-interest within their ideals. He wants a better human understanding of the inherently flawed human nature since he believes that when people realise the dangers and perils of their own selfishness, it will produce greater humility and as a result foster more respect and tolerance among different and diverse individuals and groups within society. He explains that, “It would be more helpful if we began with the truer assumption that there is no unprejudiced mind and no judgement which is not, at least partially, corrupted by pride” (Niebuhr 1947: 144). Lovin (1995: 180) provides a very interesting depiction on Niebuhr’s view when he reflects:

... [democratic] politics is the best approximation we have of a community of discourse in which our ideas about human good could be tested against all the real human beings that the ideas are about. To free oneself from one’s starting point is not merely to imagine the same self in a different situation, but to understand the possibility of a quite different human self. If I understand a situation only in terms of how it might be altered better to suit my needs or the needs of persons very much like me, I am not yet free of it. But the only practical way to know that I have grasped a different set of possibilities is to have my perceptions confirmed, transformed, or challenged by others with quite different experiences. Only when we understand politics in those terms can we avoid reducing it to an instrument by which we gain our ends at the expense of others who are less skilled in manipulating the system.

Niebuhr tries to achieve a way in which society can have more humble leaders and a more humble groups and communities within society that are much more other-regarding than the individualism of liberalism. Societies that have cultivated more of such a regard for others are more likely to make greater strides towards the promotion of welfare and

assistance, especially for those who are most exposed to the dangers of the individual- and group focused behaviour of the powerful within society. Leaders have an important role to play to cultivate and promote welfare and assistance within societies. He explains that,

[d]emocratic life requires a spirit of tolerant cooperation between individuals and groups which can be achieved by neither moral cynics, who know no law beyond their own interest, nor by moral idealists, who acknowledge such as law but are unconscious of the corruption which insinuates itself into the statement of it by even the most disinterested idealists (Niebuhr 1947: 151).

Democracy is a tool that can help to engender humility since it does justice to human freedom and creates more space for people to deal with their differences in a peaceful way. Together with this, democracy also provides the necessary tools to constrain human selfish interests but not at the cost of human freedom. This will be discussed further in the following sections of the task and structure of democracy.

Although Niebuhr always retained some of his optimism, he realised that achieving a just, lasting and democratic peace is unlikely. When he presents his thoughts on ways of producing humble leaders and greater welfare within society, he is always very aware of the flaws of human nature and realistic about the limits to any form or system of government and society. His idea of imparting humility into the political system was never based only on religious devotion to moral ideas, but it encompassed a deeper understanding and revelation of the sinfulness of humans. For Niebuhr, a democratic society must “seek proximate solutions for this problem in indeterminate creative ventures. But the solutions will be more, rather than less, creative if democratic idealists understand the depth of the problem with which they are dealing” (Niebuhr 1947: 144).

#### **4.5.2 The task of democracy**

Niebuhr viewed the task of democracy as that of an instrument aimed at appropriate, even if temporary, solutions to alleviating injustices within societies. Democracy for him was a

pragmatic virtue and a method for “finding proximate solutions for insoluble problems” (Niebuhr 1947: 118) There are no final or permanent solutions to justice as well as adjudicating between order and the need for justice, but Niebuhr found democracy a good pragmatic solution to these challenges, since it promotes freedom that allows people to achieve greater levels of justice but also places checks and restrictions on the dangers of self-interest of humans.

As we saw, Niebuhr’s desire for greater social justice was motivated by his own religious convictions based on the law of love and his high regard for every individual as creations of God. But his quest for greater equality in the promotion of greater social justice also developed from his shock at the high and growing levels of inequalities in Detroit and elsewhere due to industrialisation. He knew that these inequalities were largely as a result of the liberal quest for freedom and wealth and manifested in a small capitalist elite who wanted to grow their material wealth at the expense of others.

As explained earlier in the chapter, political equality is an important part of liberal democratic societies, but Niebuhr believes that democracy will be better if political equality also extends to more economic equality. Within democracy it is possible to achieve this, because democratic societies are more malleable and open to deal with pressures from different groups. Instead of tyrannical rulers, democracy is capable of dealing with economic challenges through peace, compromise and the establishment of greater levels of consensus among different groups within societies. It allows the space for groups that are exploited and marginalised to also voice their concerns. Even though these principles will look different in every society, democracy allows for a wider scope of different demands from different groups within societies. Through political institutions, democracy provides a framework in which leaders can deal with the different voices and groups and find amicable solutions to the injustices within societies. As mentioned earlier, Niebuhr for example, supported the formation of trade unions as a means through which workers could express their grievances in order to find political solutions to the social and economic challenges faced by workers. Democracy promotes freedom, and Niebuhr believed that democratic freedom in the form of, for example,

freedom of expression and the freedom of workers to mobilise members, was at the disposal of workers to clearly articulate their grievances as a strong and powerful force against injustices. Political leaders thus had to respond to the grievances and address the challenges faced by workers if they wanted to remain in power. Niebuhr (1947: 148) proposed that,

[t]he ideal possibility is that the debate between classes should issue, not in an impasse which makes progressive justice impossible, but that it should gradually shift the political institutions of the community to conform to changing economic needs and unchanging demands for a higher justice.

Establishing some equilibrium between class forces should never be static and Niebuhr believes that democracy allows for shifts of power to take place between different groups within society (Niebuhr 1947: 148). Niebuhr believes that democratic freedom allows marginalised groups such as the working class, as mentioned above, to express their grievances. Government becomes the important organising centre with its role to secure justice within society, including arbitrating conflicts more impartially than those parties in the conflict. Government should redress disproportions of power by shifting the balance whenever there are injustices prevalent within society. When, for example, a small capitalist elite become powerful and exploit workers, it is necessary for the government to implement policies in favour of greater equality between groups. Together with this, Niebuhr's political involvements as mentioned in the preceding chapters, such as his support for trade unions, his advocacy for African American political struggles and his support for Roosevelt's New Deal, highlights his support for democracy and the important role of citizen and government involvement in support of greater equilibrium between different groups within society.

Niebuhr believed that democracy can be strengthened through a much deeper ethical ideal emanating from awareness as to why greater equality is something to aspire to. Here Niebuhr goes back to important religious resources in his quest to make democracy robust, and to counter the individualism of liberal culture which often leads to



exploitation and injustices. He uses his Christian resources, as explained in chapter two, of love which informs justice in the form of the transcendent principles of equality and freedom (Niebuhr 1996b: 264). He also points out that religious resources have historically played an important role in the promotion of greater social justice. That is why he believes it remains an important resource that should be ‘restored’ in the midst of the excessive individualism of modern times (Niebuhr 1947: 120).

He emphasises the value of the individual but always as this relates to their equal standing with others. Niebuhr’s understanding of the equality of people stems from his high regard for the importance of the individual. He sees individual life as important because they are made in the image of God. Human life has value and importance because God created it and he declared it good. Therefore, if any system of government wants to succeed in ensuring the well-being of all people, it must start by accepting the importance and inherent value of each individual person (Niebuhr 1996a: 161). Furthermore, along with this appreciation of the importance of the individual, will come a deeper respect for others since all humans are the carriers of the image of God. When people understand their importance before God, as created in the image of God, they will be able to, not only, realise their own worth as individuals but also have a greater respect for others. Gilkey (2001: 204) states that Niebuhr believes that an individual’s worth before God will cultivate respect for others, and this understanding is one of the root sources of equality in modern times.

A further task of democracy is to allow citizens to question and critique government through for example freedom of expression and freedom of speech, as well as to decide, through elections, who they want in power. These freedoms again highlights what Niebuhr regards as an expression of human freedom. Niebuhr (1947: 133) believes that democracy can be strengthened further by imparting more valuable religious resources to citizens’ views of government. Niebuhr argues that religious values can help shape citizens’ views on those in power. For example, when citizens realise there is a higher authority than the state or government, they will not follow government blindly. His rationale for this is as follows. If citizens have a strong moral value system, which

emphasises care for the other, then government will also be placed under stronger criticism partly because people will be morally more inclined to greater justice for all within society. They will therefore not become complacent but place their concerns before government in order to deal more effectively with issues of justice within society. A greater understanding of human nature, as well as the relationship between love and justice will make people more aware of a higher moral force. As a result, they will seek more moral and just goals. Democracy then will provide such an avenue through which people can express and act upon this greater moral awareness they feel towards their society, because democracy allows for the expression of freedom, which forms an inherent part of human nature. Whether this expression is through, for example, the formation of trade unions or civil society organisations, without democracy there will be less space for this.

#### **4.5.3 The structure of democracy**

At the beginning and throughout the chapter it was made clear that Niebuhr (1947: 1) provided a penetrating criticism against the liberal cultural context in which he lived. Nevertheless, it was also highlighted that he did not disregard liberalism entirely. Although he criticised the liberal excessive focus on individual freedom, he always remained an advocate for the protection of individual freedom because humans are essentially free and also require freedom within the organisation of society. Accordingly, he also supported liberal democratic ideals in the organisation of society, especially as it protects and promotes human freedom. But he wanted something deeper and more since individual freedom is also a threat to the freedom of others. Rice (2013: 76) captures Niebuhr's view when he explains that democracy is an important form of government that acts as an instrument in advancing human creativity while constraining human destructiveness. This also reflects in the structures of democracy that Niebuhr promoted.

Niebuhr (1947: 3) still valued the liberal democratic emphasis on the importance of the individual and its promotion of negative freedoms in order to protect individual rights and privileges from state interference, since he was well aware of the dangers of

government power. More practically however, Niebuhr was not particularly clear and did not explain in detail which exact liberal institutions and structures he supported. It is never explained explicitly within the work which this study is focussing on. However, it is possible to assume that he supports those liberal democratic institutions that 1) promotes individual freedom and 2) protects individual freedom through placing checks on government power.

Callen (2001: 5), Fox (1985: 219), and Stone (1972:113) explain in great detail what this support by Niebuhr for liberal democracy entails. Firstly, liberal democracies promote individual freedom through the promotion of political equality where citizens have equal individual rights and liberties. These include civil liberties and freedoms such as freedom of speech and religion. Further rights include elections and universal suffrage where citizens have the power to vote for leaders and choose who should represent them in government. Secondly, liberal democracies protect individuals against the dangers of government power and tyranny. It is evident from history that government is morally ambiguous. As a result, government can easily fall into the same imperialist and authoritarian impulses as society. An equalisation of power is necessary within democracy in order to ensure that justice is secured in a framework of order. This means that there must be similar checks within government itself – resistance in government – in order to ensure that both the ambitions of rulers and temptation of communities are restrained. To secure justice it is important that there be a responsible control over government so that the government will be able to redress the imbalances of power throughout society. Constitutions are central in liberal democracies since it sets out the rights and duties of citizens as well as the structures of government. The rule of law forms the basis, in which the law governs society instead of the will of individuals within government. Within liberal democratic constitutions there are checks and balances to protect individuals against the governments' misuse of power. This includes the separation of power between the political institutions including executive, legislative and judicial powers. In principle, it achieves resistance to government within the principle of government itself. Elections are also important not only as it gives more freedom to the individual, but also as a way to keep government power in check.

He saw the role of government within democratic societies not only as the promoter of negative freedom in favour of freedom of the individual, but he also wanted the government to promote positive freedoms. As Lovin (1995: 183) explains, Niebuhr understood the importance of different social institutions in their role to influence, persuade and pressure or use economic incentives. He wanted democratic governments to play a more active role in the promotion of social justice by also interfering in political, social and economic spheres of a society. In other words, he did not only see the function of government within democratic societies as confined to protecting individual freedom, but wanted the state to have a more expansive role within society in order to ensure greater social justice.

In effect, Niebuhr is not redefining democracy but instead, he is providing an interesting intellectual defence of democracy. He highlights the importance and necessity of democracy but defends and tries to ‘steer’ it away from the excesses of extreme liberal individualistic views which he believes undermines what is at the heart of democracy. Democracy understood in its ‘purer’ form, moves beyond the excessive focus on individual and political liberty towards the importance of democracy as a measure of openness, freedom and flexibility which reflects the indeterminate heights of human freedom.

Niebuhr’s vision of the structures that should be in place within democratic societies was not always the clearest or most practical solutions. Rather, the strength of his engagement with, and advocacy for, democracy lies with the realistic view of human nature he brings to bare on it and how this then informs and motivates his political thought in general. Niebuhr tends to be vague about the precise processes and structures he would prefer within democracy. His position on democracy can however be clarified and better explained by recognising that his understanding of the role and place of democracy closely aligns him to the social democratic tradition. He can in fact be viewed as an early proponent of this tradition which became so prominent during the middle to late twentieth century, even though he was never widely known for this. His advocacy for the freedom of the individual, coupled to his support for a significant role for government in

the maintenance of a balance of power between different groups within societies, clearly places him within the realm of social democracy.

The development of social democracy can be traced back to the influences of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. While Marxist theorists were hostile towards capitalism and wanted it to be overthrown completely, there were those within this school of thought that realised the dangers and difficulties of such revolutionary means. This led to a distinctive break during World War I between revolutionary views of overthrowing the capitalist system entirely and establishing a classless society, and those who pushed for gradual reform of capitalism towards a more socialist society. The latter group came to be associated with the name social democrats. Since the end of World War II, modern social democrats especially in Europe have moved away from ideas of building alternative economic systems. Instead, they affirm market-based economic orders and private entrepreneurship while still focusing on state intervention to guide or steer the market so as to improve the well-being of all within society, especially underprivileged groups (Jackson 2013: 3; Meyer & Hinchman 2007: 4; Newman 2005: 47; Radice 1965: 67; Vaizey 1971: 32). Even though social democracy started out as Marxist (collectivist) idea, it shifted, especially after World War II to a decidedly liberal theory. It was liberals such as Rawls, Habermas, and even, as is argued here, Niebuhr who started to become more socially aware. This more social form of liberalism is, to a large extent, the dominant school of liberal thinking today with the main alternative being classical liberalism (or libertarianism) (Heywood 2007a: 57).

Social liberalism and its simultaneous support for social democracy, continues to emphasise the importance of negative liberty – where there is an absence of external restrictions, maximising the freedom of individual action and choice (Heywood 2007b: 31). Notwithstanding, social democratic theories also emphasises positive liberty. It endorses social and economic intervention by the state as a way to promote personal development, self-mastery and individual self-realisation (Heywood 2007b: 31). Social democracy supports a wider scope and greater extension of the political within social, economic and political spheres. Part of this social order is the promotion of more

inclusive participation of citizens in democracy, while the state and government should also play a more significant role within society. This role includes the provision of social security to citizens, distributing wealth and income more justly, as well as having regulative and distributive policies in place according to some form of just standards within that society.

As a result, for social democrats the role of the government should extend further than the liberal democratic aim of merely securing liberty for the individual. It also requires intervention in the economic and social spheres of societies in order to promote greater equality and justice among different groups. Government, in this view, is regarded as a good force which is democratically elected and capable of intervening in social and economic spheres in order to restrain markets and promote redistribution as a way of ensuring that it also works towards the benefit of lower classes and establish a more equitable society. Policies within social democratic societies include, for example, the nationalisation of some industries, increasing public spending by the state, as well as the state's greater role in providing or subsidising important sectors such as health care and education (Meyer & Hinchman 2007: 4).

Social democrats also promote greater social justice through democratic institutions. There are four debates that stand out within the social democratic tradition on promoting justice within society. Meyer & Hinchman (2007: 59) summarises them as, "...John Rawls' contractual theory of justice as fairness; Michael Walzer's communitarian theory of spheres of justice; Ronald Dworkin's theory of resource equality; and Jürgen Habermas's discourse-ethical theory of deliberative democracy." These positions have very different approaches to justice, but they all share "...an egalitarian interpretation of justice stemming from the liberal tradition, as well as the conviction that both positive and negative liberties have a place in justice" (Meyer & Hinchman 2007: 59). These different views support the fundamental equality of human civil rights and the centrality of liberal democratic institutions. They make a strong link between the concept of positive civil liberty and the availability of social and economic resources, since these resources are vital to enable an individual to choose or act freely. The different views

within this tradition, agree that democratic institutions require a greater emphasis on equality, tied to an understanding of positive freedom, and that account must be given where inequalities of income do arise. They also agree that some inequalities are legitimate but must be consistent with upholding the rights of others. Furthermore, justice relates to more than the distribution of material and cultural resources – it also includes individual and collective chances of participating in the state, economy and society. Justice is, therefore, about the procedure through which means are created within a society, as well as about the criteria of justice that different parties jointly decide on, and how they define and interpret them. These principles serve as reference for discourses concerned with their political application, including regulative and distributive policies of social democracy (Dahm & Krell & Reschke, et al 2013; Meyer & Hinchman 2007: 61). Social democracy thus values the importance of individual freedom with democracy as the manner through which to aggregate individual preferences in order to legitimize combined action. It thus respects the freedom and agency of individuals, but it also legitimises the government to play a significant role in order to ensure large scale egalitarian justice. Social democratic ordering of society can enhance justice, which is exactly what Niebuhr is advocating.

Niebuhr's own conception of justice stems from the importance of the individual, specifically as he relates it to humans as valuable and made in the image of God. The value that he attaches to the individual reflects and places him under the umbrella of the liberal tradition. However, he moves beyond the excessive individualism of the liberal culture and places just as much emphasis on the importance of a community and the collective behaviour of groups. His commitment to community is actually stronger than all four of the social democratic theorists mentioned above. This makes it somewhat difficult to position him comfortably as a liberal. Any standard category is difficult with Niebuhr, since he is both a strong liberal, attaching a high value on the individual. But he is also a strong communitarian and regards community as valuable since individuals can only realise themselves through the community. He emphasises the necessity of strong relationships with God and with others through his understanding of love and justice

(Niebuhr 1947: 4). Niebuhr's strong attachment to both the high value of the individual as well as the community makes any fixed evaluative category problematic.

He uses the importance and respect for individuals from liberalism, but he never sees it in the same radical way as liberals where individuals are atomistic and separate from others. It is also not just the separateness (atomism) of individuals that Niebuhr emphasises but also the fact that there is a higher standard or authority above the individual (i.e. God). The individual is not the source of meaning. Meaning and value is from a source not located within the individual. He also believes people are created equally which means people should also be treated as equally important within society. He was concerned with the well-being of, not only the individual, but society as a whole, including the collective well-being within social, political and economic spheres. This is why he supported a view of democracy, similar to social democracy, where government power is held in check by regular accounting to the citizens through free elections, but where government also becomes a force that promotes policies that reflects the importance of the freedom as well as the equality of every individual within society.

#### **4.6 Overview of Niebuhr's view of democracy**

The vision of democracy presented by Niebuhr was very unique for the time he lived in - it was progressive yet also subdued and intellectually rigorous. In this vision he presents he endeavours to explain how Christian resources can form an integral part of, and be beneficial to, democracy as an instrument for the promotion of greater justice within societies. He recognises the importance of liberal democratic values and institutions but tries to, through Christian insights, remind people about the important value of democracy beyond the liberal focus on individual agency and choice. He advances democracy as an instrument that promotes the dignity of the individual along with a sense of responsibility to the wider community. As Rice (2013: 77) explains, Niebuhr wanted to show that democracy embodies fundamental values which give fuller expression to the importance of individuals than other systems, but never at the cost of others. For Niebuhr (1947: 3), it does justice to the common necessities of humans but also the uniqueness and variety of life, as well as to the human spiritual stature and their social character.



His thought presents us with a democratic system based on his insights, drawn from Christian understanding but which can be appropriated by Christians and non-Christians, to best advance social justice. He believed that his understanding of democracy will help create a system that will allow for a balance of power within government as well as between government and society, greater equality among citizens, and greater citizen access to government. He assumes that a better understanding of human nature and the danger it poses will lead to the implementation of policies that control and limit the amount of power individuals receive. Niebuhr (1947: 134) argues further that knowing people are all created as equal will help them acknowledge and realise the importance of equality of citizens and ensure that all people receive the same treatment before the law. Together with this, respect and tolerance for others will allow for greater and more equal and open access to all, allowing greater opportunities for more people. Niebuhr also notes that a society more inclined to promote greater social justice will also be more civil, open and malleable as a society. Harland (1960: 171) summarises Niebuhr's views on democracy well when he writes that these insights remind people that individuals have a source of authority that defies civil authorities. It appreciates as no other form of government the worth of the individual and their position before God. It also recognises the depth of man's sin and his creative powers, which justifies the checks upon man's power in democratic institutions. When true to itself, democracy actualises the spirit of humility and toleration.

#### **4.7 Reflections on Niebuhr's approach**

Throughout Niebuhr's political thought and notably also in his support for democracy, he consistently aligns his political ideas with his Christian understanding. Not only does he use Christian resources to criticise existing views, but he also uses these religious resources to promote a stronger democratic approach. In particular he draws heavily on a specific strand within Christianity, namely the Protestant ethic. Many authors, including Callen (2001: 18), Fox (1985: 193), McCann (1981: 121) and Stone (1972: 56) have raised concerns about Niebuhr's narrow focus on Protestantism, in that this might

alienates other strands of Christianity as well as other religions, and disregards their valuable moral contributions. When there are so many different values and perspectives within societies, it is questionable whether it is possible to build a diverse society based solely on such Protestant values.

When considering the centrality of Niebuhr's Protestantism to his political thought, a number of factors need to be born in mind. Niebuhr has a deep ethical and religious desire for greater justice within societies and his conviction that politics has a role to play in promoting and achieving greater levels of justice. As was noted in chapter two, conceptions and interpretations of justice and social justice depend largely on the context and value commitments of people, which, in turn are shaped by the normative framework they bring to bare on it (Miller 2003: 84; Sandel 2009: 261; Swift 2001: 17). Thus, views on what is just and unjust are always shaped by people's morals and values, and this will consequently determine what they think is necessary to achieve greater social justice, including the social and political organisational structures that should be in place. This also applies to Niebuhr. When he considered different approaches to the organisation of society, it was shaped by his personal convictions and beliefs and what he thought was necessary for the time and context in which he lived.

Even though he speaks from within a specific subjective position, as we all do, his critical engagement with his subject matter still rest on coherent argumentation, most notably so in terms of his critique of the assumptions underlying liberal thought. He understood the dangers of a too narrow focus on specific values which is why he criticised the liberal view of individual freedom as the apex and ultimate goal of human achievement and that reason is the means through which to achieve this. The liberal belief in progress through reason is also not, according to Niebuhr, a universal truth that should be applied in all circumstances as assumed by liberals. The bourgeoisie mistook their own progress for the progress of the world when it is in fact a middle-class ideology. It is not transcendent over others and should not be mistaken as a universal goal applicable within all circumstances (Niebuhr 1956: 13). Therefore, liberal beliefs also depend largely on the

context and value commitments of people, shaped by normative ideas. Liberal values, like all others, are not transcendent but ultimately also judgement calls.

Therefore, Niebuhr believes for democracy to work, it must allow for and include many different value systems because of the fragmentary character of all systems of value which is allowed to exist within its frame. The danger with this fragmentation is that it allows for pressures from many different systems, values and perspectives, while not being capable of performing any strategy consistently. Any system with such a character must always be careful to allow elements of truth of the different values to be carried out as whole truths (Bingham 1993: 303). For Niebuhr (1947: 151) this means there must always be elasticity in democratic process to allow different views to compete with others, but within a system that promotes compromise and tolerance.

Niebuhr bases his views on Christian values not just because of his value commitments but also because he found it more realistic than alternative positions in dealing with the problems of humans and the implication for societies. As such, Niebuhr saw realism as crucial when engaging with political life, since the injustices committed within societies are rooted within human self-love, which stems from the self's finite freedom (Niebuhr 1996a: 18). He knew that the doctrine of "original sin" was not accepted in modern thinking, but his argument rested on this premise because he argued that it could be verified empirically as self-interest was clearly visible in human affairs. Therefore, in his view of democracy, he combined idealism with an injection of realism (Rice 2013: 75). He tries to find other resources to deal with the challenges of integrating diversity of life and beliefs in such a way that there is harmony within a society and among different groups. He believes the Christian faith, particularly the Protestant Reformation approach, understands and deals better, and more realistically, with the challenges of human nature as well as provides the necessary resources and values that could address social injustices. He never advocates for a theocratic state but by no means did he see secular values as the ultimate or absolute answer for the organisation of society. In fact, he did not think that the state as a secular institution could fulfil the moral and spiritual needs of

individuals, it will simply lead to a vacuum which will easily be filled by a dangerous secular religion, such as Nazism or Communism (Callen 2001: 15).

Embedded within Niebuhr's work is the conviction that democracy is not just the product of the secular pursuit for greater individual freedom. In actuality religious thought, especially Christianity has made important contributions to the development of democracy and therefore, it can and should still play a significant role. Historically, he believes that western democracy developed not only because of the bourgeois push for greater freedom of the individuals. He says that "Democracy is...the fruit of a cultural and religious pluralism created by inexorable forces of history" (Niebuhr 1947: 120). He explains this against the backdrop of the disintegration of the religious and social unity of the medieval period. Diversity, plurality and tolerance which developed from different religious convictions are some of the most important values found in democratic societies, and so the development of democratic ideals should not be separated from its important religious roots (Niebuhr 1947: 137).

Niebuhr asks some important and relevant questions about the importance of moral values such as *agape*, other than secular values, within the democratic organisation of society. He also underlines how religious values could help to inform politics and improve democratic processes in the promotion of greater social justice. Religion, particularly Judeo-Christian values, have formed and shaped important values, such as freedom and equality, within western democratic societies. Niebuhr's view on the important connection between democracy, the promotion of equality and his Christian views is echoed in the following statement by Jürgen Habermas (2006: 150):

Universalistic egalitarianism, from which sprang the ideals of freedom and a collective life in solidarity, the autonomous conduct of life and emancipation, the individual morality of conscience, human rights and democracy, is the direct legacy of the Judaic ethic of justice and the Christian ethic of love. This legacy, substantially unchanged, has been the object of continual critical appropriation and reinterpretation. To this day, there is no alternative to it. And in light of the current challenges of a postnational

constellation, we continue to draw on the substance of this heritage. Everything else is just idle postmodern talk.

These religious impulses and values are important in motivating people to become involved in politics, since Niebuhr saw politics as a positive way in which to solve conflicts within societies. The state and government are necessary and important realities within the organisation of societies and has far reaching effects on everyone within society (Lovin 1995: 183). From this it is clear that Niebuhr strongly believes that it is necessary to become involved in politics to make a positive contribution within society. Through democracy people have the opportunity to participate and to voice their concerns. This at least provides a platform for addressing pressing issues and claims. He wanted to encourage people to become involved in the processes of decision making in order to promote the well-being of societies. Democracy is more open and malleable than other political systems which mean if enough people are dissatisfied with the injustices within societies, such as high levels of exploitation and inequality, they can use democratic means to bring about change. Instead of apathetic citizenry, people can play a critical role in politics. In democratic societies, people have enough power to question government when it lacks the policies and actions to support in the well-being of everyone within society. Democracy is an instrument through which citizens can address injustices, especially at times when government acts in the interests of a few at the expense of others. It is then an important means through which to counter and push for positive change. This can be done through peaceful established democratic processes, and if those in power want to remain in power, they will have to respond to demands from citizens. Political decision-making is not only the responsibility government. Civil society, other organisations, including churches and religious or faith-based organisations can be used more effectively in discussions, debates and in incorporating values such as respect, toleration and inclusiveness, and civic responsibly into politics.

His views reflect the promotion of human rights, especially as the concept grew during the twentieth century. An important aspect of this is the protection of the individual from getting absorbed into aspirations of leaders or parties, thus protecting them from what

politics can do to them. Nevertheless, the US Bill of Rights, for example, places so much emphasis on the liberty of the individual and concurrent negative rights. Against this backdrop, his case for a more inclusive system of government, requires more active voices that value the well-being of all living within society, including different community organisations, offices, the media, churches, schools and universities, all forming part of a caring and educative community. He was never interested in promoting a freedom that only seeks protection for the individual, but he also wanted to promote a political culture where people participated in politics. He believed that an important part of freedom is to make adjustments, reshape visions and negotiate so as to ensure willing and sustained cooperation. He felt strongly that those achievements that endure are the work of communities. Government remains an important instrument in leading society and putting in place the necessary measures to promote greater justice. Within a community, cooperation means accepting opposing views while trying to find durable solutions for all of those living within society (Lovin 1995: 178).

In Niebuhr's view, the institution of government should be seen as a pragmatic force. Moreover, any social critic or philosopher should always be aware that institutions that were effective in the past may be out-dated and in need of modification. Institutions of government should, therefore, be examined for their usefulness within a particular context of that society. When politics and society is studied with such pragmatism, it shifts the focus from a systematic explanation of moral law in political life to the study of how "tentative, regulative principles of morality function in history" (Stone 1972: 146). This is yet another important observation with regards to Niebuhr's political thought, namely the relativity of all political systems, including democracy. Although he believes democracy does justice to people's spiritual stature and social character, history remains contingent and human nature is easily corrupted. This means that all political solutions to the challenges facing societies are eventually corrupted, and in need of on-going dialogue which is likely to change in the quest of finding proximate solutions (Bingham 1993: 307; Callen 2001: 7). Niebuhr therefore admits that there is no guarantee that democracy will always remain the best or most appropriate instrument of organising society, since every particular context requires its own organising principles. Instead, Niebuhr believes

that we have to accept that there is no political system that is final or absolute. It remains an instrument that is bound to change because societies change, and it is not necessarily applicable in the same form across the world. Inevitably, it will be corrupted due to selfish human nature and sin and should never be regarded as some absolute, ultimate or perfect way of organising society. Democracy is, after all, “a method of finding proximate solutions for insoluble problems” (Niebuhr 1947: 118). Niebuhr summarises this well when he notes that “[o]ur knowledge that there is no complete solution for the problem would save us from resting in some proximate solution under the illusion that it is an ultimate one” (Niebuhr 1947: 145).

When reflecting on both Niebuhr’s written work and his activism, it is clear that one of his primary aims was using democracy to generate greater justice. Justice, for him, was a partial fulfilment of a religious ideal. His fundamental religious belief in the importance of individual life but also the corruption and dangers it holds for others, produced in him a sense of righteous anger towards the exploitations and inequalities that he was exposed to and observed during his lifetime. In response he presented an alternative value system that would promote a more just political culture, as well as a more secure system for the promotion of social justice. An aspect of his work and thinking that cannot be emphasised enough is his pragmatic stance on complicated religious and societal issues. He did not want to fall into debates about theological questions but he nevertheless tried to effectively use important theological principles specifically as it related to societal and political issues of the day. To a large degree, it was his way of trying to make sense of, and finding better answers for, a troubled and chaotic world (Callen 2001: 21).

#### **4.8 Conclusion**

Throughout this study, Niebuhr’s views on human nature, history, justice and different approaches to organising society were explained in detail. This chapter tried to link all these various views as it culminates in his democratic solution to the ordering of society. Niebuhr clearly sees democracy as a valuable form of government. His views on democracy were shaped largely by the liberal democratic society in which he lived. The

liberal values and liberal culture shaped Niebuhr's thinking in two important ways. While he appreciates the liberal protection of individual freedom, he also criticises liberals for focusing too excessively on individual freedom. He is extremely critical of liberal culture and liberal democratic policies excessive focus on individual freedom because it results in high levels of inequality within society. He realised that excessive freedom is always at the cost of freedom of others within society. It motivated him to find a better democratic solution based on his theologically-based understanding of human nature and its implications for the structures of society.

The rest of the chapter elaborated on Niebuhr's view of democracy as a partial solution to the challenges within society and it explains why Niebuhr viewed democracy as necessary. For him, democracy is necessary because it does justice to the essentially free nature of humans, but also takes seriously the dangers of human self-interest. Furthermore, he views democracy as an instrument to promote greater levels of justice in that it advances both equality and freedom for everyone within society better than other forms of government. He argues that democracy is capable of absorbing and advancing many different and diverse views, as well as to readjust different claims in the promotion of the welfare of societies. Structurally and institutionally, he supported the liberal democratic ideals of promoting individual freedom and protecting individuals from the danger of government power. But in order to achieve greater levels of justice and welfare, he realised that the government also has a vital role to play. The severe restrictions on government's involvement so as to promote individual liberty has had far reaching consequences within society and enabled more powerful groups to exploit weaker groups. Along with his general support for negative liberty, Niebuhr also advocated for a positive, enabling understanding of liberty which endorses state intervention so as to promote the development and well-being of everyone within society, politically, socially as well as economically. Niebuhr thus supports greater societal intervention by a democratically elected government in aid of the promotion of social welfare. This broad description of Niebuhr's stance on democracy makes it apparent and fitting to place his views under the larger umbrella of the social democratic tradition.



Nevertheless, his views on democracy are still unique especially in his use of Christian resources to provide an even deeper and better understanding of societal challenges. He also employs these insights in his explanation of how to strengthen democracies. Democratic values such as the value of the individual, equality, respect, humility, tolerance, inclusiveness and the appreciation of diversity all come from religious resources which have helped to shape democratic practices and institutions. The contribution of religious resources should therefore not be underestimated, and Niebuhr believes that it can actually still help to strengthen democracy.

However, he did not provide any final ideal form for the organising of society, for he was too aware of the limits of making universal or ultimate claims. He, however, wanted people to realise the importance of becoming involved within political activities because people's active involvement can make a contribution and bring change within society. For him, democracy was an especially useful instrument because it is the only system that is malleable enough and capable of incorporating various differences within the political structures within society. Essentially, when Niebuhr's view of human nature is taken seriously, democracy becomes both possible and necessary as the best, albeit partial, solution to the challenges of life within large societies.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

This final chapter presents a summary of the conclusions that were reached in the preceding chapters in view of the main research question. In all of the preceding chapters, we followed the development and the changes in Niebuhr's political and social thought as it leads to his democratic views. The aim of this chapter is to restate the reason for this study as well as to provide a logical and a coherent overview answering the primary research question.

This study aimed to demonstrate why Niebuhr viewed democracy as a necessary instrument for the promotion of social justice. At the outset of this research, the primary question was formulated with the aim of establishing why Niebuhr viewed democracy as the most appropriate ordering framework in which social justice could flourish. His reasons for promoting democracy follow logically from his theological work on human nature, his views on justice and social justice, and his practical experiences. Coherence therefore exists in his writings. It is clear that his conclusion on democracy is not an impulsive response, nor merely conformable. His support for democracy is the product of deep, wide-ranging, and realistic reflection. It is thus appropriate to briefly explain the key ideas as it developed from the preceding chapters and to demonstrate its logical flow to Niebuhr's views on democracy.

Chapter two of this study demonstrates a steady progression in Niebuhr's conception of human nature and the implications thereof on his views on history, on justice and social justice, as well as on the organisation of society and democracy. Niebuhr's conception of human nature is fundamental to the rest of his social and political thought. He argues that the Christian view of human nature presents both a truthful and a realistic approach thereto. When Niebuhr contemplates the human condition, he is suggesting that at least two assumptions about the self can be made, namely that the self is essentially free, but also essentially finite. For Niebuhr, this dual condition of free yet finite encapsulates the Christian interpretation of the self-transcendent heights of the spiritual stature of humans,

while also accurately representing our human involvement in the necessities and the contingencies of the temporal world. He thus believed that the human spirit is transcendent over nature and can relate to God, but also that humans, being created as they are within the natural order, remain finite and part of nature. Humans, however, often try to escape their finiteness because of their unwillingness to acknowledge or to accept that they are creaturely and dependent on God. This causes sin and exposes the evil in humans. Niebuhr focuses on a particular manifestation of this sin, namely human pride, which reveals itself in the form of injustices and consequent domination of some over others. Domination is often worse in the social behaviour of groups in the form of collective egotism, since these individuals often behave according to their group's interests at the expense of other groups. Throughout, it is clear that Niebuhr believes that evil and unjust behaviour of both individuals and groups are to be expected, since it is a natural result of the true essential condition of all of humanity.

Nevertheless, Niebuhr is not entirely pessimistic about societies' potential, because human freedom also allows for greater possibilities of progress within history. As we know, Niebuhr believed that humans are capable of both good and evil, but just as limits exist to the possibilities of justice because of the selfishness of human nature, so do possibilities of caring for others exist because of human freedom. He does not think that it is possible to achieve perfect and unconditional love in this world because of the contradictory nature of humans. Nevertheless, Niebuhr remains hopeful that love, especially the *agape* understanding of love, can influence and act as a standard for motive and action in history. *Agape* is essential in Niebuhr's thought since it informs his personal motivation for caring about social justice. He reflected deeply on the significance of *agape* not only as a personal conviction, but also as a valuable source to achieve greater justice within society. He believes that humans, imbued with a sense of security in God's sacrificial love for them, will be deeply motivated towards greater selflessness and active care for others.

Niebuhr carefully explores the link between love and justice in his writing, for it serves as the foundation for the ultimate value and legitimacy of justice within society. He recognises that true *agape* may be an impossible achievement within society, since many

will use their freedom to reject God's love for them. It can, however, act as the moral standard, where justice becomes the principle according to which humans order society. Justice is valuable within societies because it points towards a greater ethical ideal, namely *agape*, which are relationships primarily structured according to regard for others as opposed to self-regard.

For Niebuhr, the quest for justice includes aspiring for transcendent principles such as freedom and equality. Transcendent principles are accepted and understood on a large scale across history and cannot be limited to a specific time and place, but used within specific historical contexts differently. In every unique context with its own particularities and grievances, Niebuhr believed that seeking greater justice for those living within that particular society was possible. Societies progress to social justice when they make strides towards greater equality between different groups. Niebuhr's social ethics directed his quest towards finding political solutions to the challenges of injustices facing society.

Niebuhr's quest for finding political solutions to social injustices is clearly reflected in the third chapter's description of the different influences that shaped Niebuhr's social and political thought, as well as of the changes that took place within these thoughts towards his Christian Realism. His social and political thought were clearly shaped by his liberal upbringing, as well as his exposure to the US growth in industry in Detroit, which led to new burdens for city dwellers and increasing levels of inequality. These struggles challenged his liberal views and led to a profound quest for finding solutions to the prevailing injustices. He increasingly criticised existing approaches, which he termed 'alternative positions' to his own position. He argued that they did not sufficiently address the problems of social justice, mainly because they presented skewed views of the options and the possibilities for organising society, human nature, and history.

Niebuhr's argument is well illustrated by considering the broad categories in which he first groups, and then criticises these alternative positions:

- His first critique was aimed at those whom he labelled the “children of light”, and included both liberal and Marxist views. He refers to the “children of light” as optimists because of their overly optimistic evaluation of human nature, and since they reject original sin and the danger of humans’ inherent selfish nature. Liberals place excessive emphasis on individual freedom and human capacity for goodness and progress, but never consider the dangers of individual freedom due to humans’ selfish nature. Marxists place their hope in an egalitarian society of equality and harmony following a struggle against the bourgeois and capitalist class society. Niebuhr argues that the alternative positions are unrealistic and too optimistic about human possibility, in addition to being utopian or sentimental about the possibilities within history. He believed that they place their hope in some universal law, or an idealistic and simplified resolution to the challenges faced within societies. Liberals promote liberal democracy as the best way of protecting freedom of individuals within that society. But Niebuhr was afraid that protecting the individual at the expense of the community would lead to greater inequality and instability. Whereas Marxists promote a more socialist and equal society without state or government interference, this was inconceivable in Niebuhr’s mind. Humans are both sinful and selfish, which make it presumptuous to assume that they will live in harmony and equality with others.
- His second critique was of “the children of darkness”. Although they have the wisdom to be more realistic about the dangers of human self-interest, their pessimistic views are overly cynical about the limits to human progress. In addition, they assume too easily that a state with absolute power and control over society is the answer to the dangers of human self-interest. Pessimists do not believe in a higher law that promotes progress and goodness – only volition and strength can achieve this. They also do not place their hope in any possibilities within history. Moreover, pessimists view government as an institutional establishment that restrains human self-interest and human desire for dominion over others. Nevertheless, this leads to undemocratic forms of government, uncontrolled government, oligarchies and dictatorships.

Niebuhr's thought makes little sense when attempting to apply a category such as liberal or socialist to him, since he seems to agree, yet contradict both at the same time. Throughout this study these different views of Niebuhr were carefully considered and reveal that he is not incoherent, but that he actually challenges many of our settled categories of understanding in search of a stronger justification for organising societies more justly.

Niebuhr uses and synthesises different aspects of the alternative positions, into what was later known as his Christian Realism, to find appropriate political solutions to both the challenges of excessive freedom and the dangers of order to human freedom, but he does this in conjunction with his conception of human nature. From this he concludes that progress is possible within history, but that people should always be realistic about the kind of progress that can be achieved in the context of human nature and its perils. Therefore, since evil and good develop simultaneously throughout history; this should always be considered within the organisation of societies.

With this in mind, Niebuhr believed that society consists of individuals who possess the capacity to be self-giving and caring, but who are also selfish and desiring for glory and power. Human selfishness is even more dangerous in collective behaviour, since groups are more likely to choose their own group's interests above others. Within society, there is a place for freedom of the individual because human nature requires freedom. Nevertheless, the danger with individual freedom is that human self-interest leads to the enhancement of the interests of the more powerful within society at the expense of the powerless. This principle is just amplified within group behaviour. For Niebuhr, too much freedom in the hands of the individual is dangerous for the community's freedom, whereas governmental power and order are a threat to human freedom. Niebuhr wanted to find political means and structures through which this conflict between freedom and order could be addressed more appropriately.

When he specifically turns to consider government's purpose, Niebuhr asserts that its first and foremost objective is to maintain order within societies. The second important

aim of government is to act as a force that should provide the necessary protection against domination and exploitation of some groups over others. Therefore, the government should act as a force that promotes equilibrium of power between competing groups within society. Nevertheless, in fulfilling this task, it is important to recognise that the government can easily become corrupted and abuse its power. It should, therefore, also be held in check for the protection of the individual. Hence, a government must affirm human freedom without neglecting the power of self-interest in the formation of communities, and then aim for proximate goals rather than ultimate commitments. Niebuhr thus searched for a system of government that would deal more appropriately with the problems of freedom and order within societies.

Chapters two and three consider Niebuhr's criticisms of alternative positions, as well as his own views on human nature and sin, history, justice, and social justice as the necessary foundations for his particular view of the organisation of society. Chapter four specifically considers then his defence of democracy as a necessary instrument in the organisation of society. This chapter in particular elucidates the reasons why Niebuhr was an advocate for democracy. The following reasons were identified:

- His understanding of, and support for democracy, could partly be attributed to his exposure to the American and western European understanding of politics. Niebuhr's education and upbringing were based on liberal cultural values, and more particularly liberal theology. He was raised in a liberal democratic society, and supported many of the liberal ideals of individual freedom and institutionally placing restrictions on governmental power for the protection of individual freedom. It can thus be argued that he had a predisposition to democracy as a mode of government.
- Nevertheless, two factors led him to different, yet ultimately still broadly democratic, conclusions about the liberal democratic society he lived in. The first is that his exposure to American politics, economics, and society, made him aware of the exploitation and the high levels of inequality within society due to the rising capitalism and industrialisation. He concluded that these high levels of

inequality were largely due to the excessive focus on individual freedom within the US liberal democratic form of government. He thus struggled with the excessive individualism that liberal society promoted, since he observed the adverse effects thereof on others. He did not reject democracy because of this, but argued that the excessive focus on individual freedom comes from a bourgeois middle class ideology that influenced the development of liberal democratic societies. He thereby feared that the bourgeois influence on liberal democratic societies became too closely associated with democracy itself. Niebuhr wanted to find a stronger foundation for democracy since he believed that democracy is much more valuable than what is presented within this liberal culture. The second and more foundational aspect of his critique against the highly liberal version of US democracy was drawn from his theological anthropology and his social ethic.

- Niebuhr's social ethic was based on his theological convictions that individuals are all equally important and significant, since all people are created equally valuable in the image of God. When he witnessed the exploitations within society, he was convinced that the domination of some over others was not God's purpose for people. He believed that it does not reflect the Christian ideal of attaining greater levels of justice for all in society, a justice that draws its inspiration from a true *agape* love. Furthermore, his Christian view on human nature led him to reach more realistic conclusions for the problems within society. What is interesting and significant about Niebuhr, is that his religious conviction inspired his search for practical solutions both within the political structures of society and within the context in which he lived. He was optimistic that politics could be an instrument for addressing what he regarded as ethically and morally wrong within society. Emerging from this search, he concluded that democracy is still the most viable form of political organisation.
- Niebuhr regards democracy as necessary, because it does justice to the essentially free nature of humans, but it also considers the dangers of human self-interest. Furthermore, Niebuhr views the task of democracy as being an instrument for the promotion of greater levels of justice, including higher levels of equality and



freedom for everyone within society. He argues that democracy is capable of both absorbing and advancing many different and diverse views in the interest of promoting welfare within societies. He advances democracy as an instrument that promotes the dignity of the individual along with a sense of responsibility to the wider community. Structurally and institutionally, he supported liberal democratic ideals of both promoting individual freedom and protecting individuals from the potential dangers of governmental power. But to achieve greater levels of justice and welfare, he realised that the government has a vital role to play. The restrictions on government's involvement to promote individual liberty had far-reaching consequences within society, in addition to enabling more powerful groups to exploit weaker groups. Niebuhr searched for democratic means through which government could become more actively involved in the protection and the advancement of the rights of the weaker and marginalised groups within society. Together with negative liberties, Niebuhr advocated for positive liberties to be imparted that endorse state intervention for the development and the well-being of everyone within society - politically, socially, as well as economically. Niebuhr therefore supports greater government involvement in the promotion of social welfare, which alludes to important social democratic principles.

- Throughout Niebuhr's writings, it is clear that his Christian view on human nature is an important resource that he uses to realistically explain the problems, as well as the solutions to societal problems. This then also feeds directly into his views on democracy. He regards the Christian understanding of humans as important, not only for its realistic understanding of human nature, but also for its great contribution towards the achievement of greater social justice within democratic societies. He believes that the emergence of liberal democratic societies did not develop only from the bourgeois impetus for greater liberties and rights of individuals. Niebuhr argues that the important values promoted within liberal democracies, such as tolerance, respect, equality, freedom, and diversity, can also be attributed to Christian influences. Liberals easily forget this, so Niebuhr wanted to remind society that these origins should not be forgotten or neglected.

From this emanates another important point. Since religion has also played an important role in the promotion of a democratic society, religious resources should then also be used with greater intent within the political structures of society. Nevertheless, Niebuhr never promoted a theocratic state and was mindful of the dangers of such a state. But he believed that the religious resources have a stronger, deeper, and more coherent foundation and explanatory value than liberal positions. In addition, they serve as greater motivation for governments and citizens to act in the best interests of the whole society. He envisioned how these religious and moral values could infiltrate and influence both the democratic political system and society; not as a final solution, but so as to promote the well-being of all within society.

It is perhaps in Detroit, when Niebuhr became involved socially and politically, or while preaching, writing, or teaching where he envisioned a society different from the one he was seeing. A society where the government, groups, and individuals are humbled by the revelation of their selfish human nature, but at the same time appreciating the value of every human life and realising that it is their duty to treat others with respect and a deeper sense of justice; nevertheless, a society that understands that a perfect and a final political system or way of ordering society will never exist. He found democracy to be the most accommodative to differences among individuals and groups, and best encapsulates what he envisioned for societies. Democracy promotes human freedom but also safeguards against selfish human interest. Niebuhr thus regarded democracy to be the most malleable, open, and inclusive political system, with the greatest potential to adjust and to readjust differences between competing groups within society. He viewed democracy as being a mechanism through which government and citizens can contribute positively to achieving greater balance between different groups. Even while a realist Niebuhr never lost his idealistic hopes completely; his disillusionment with existing political and social systems being counterbalanced by his hopefulness.

Niebuhr endures as an important and a relevant voice to the present day. He observed how a society's desire for material goods, wealth, and selfish gain led to the exploitation

of, and domination over, others. He was disturbed by the emptiness within society that left people increasingly isolated, depressed and with a sense of a loss of meaning. He realised that the community and the individual share equal importance, and he wanted to remind people that the pursuit of individual freedom often occurs at society's expense, which could over time lead to instability within societies. Instead, he emphasised that people are an integral part of a larger community and society. These insights are as relevant in the present day as they were before, if not more so.

Niebuhr was critical of the liberal culture because it assumes that the liberal ideals were universal and applicable to all contexts. He argued that the liberal values were also subjective, particularly favouring western bourgeois values. Nowadays, Niebuhr's criticism against the liberal culture is still relevant. The modern world as it developed in the West over the last four hundred years has had a great influence across the world, and is often regarded as superior to all civilisations of the past. As explained in Chapter three, modern culture has always been associated with liberalism. Central to this and fundamental to modernity, is the idea of autonomy of the individual, which literally means self-rule. This refers to the idea that autonomous people are rationally self-willed and can determine their own lives because of their independence of external authority (Heywood 2007b: 445). This has influenced and infiltrated societies throughout the world and is often viewed as superior to all other values within different societies. Niebuhr, however, argues that this is not reflective of true democracy. Democracy does not hold such a narrow view about protecting the autonomy of the individual. Liberal ideals from a bourgeois perspective should therefore not be associated so closely with democracy. When we disassociate democracy from the excessive liberal values, it can become an important instrument to be applied in various different contexts and societies.

As societies continue to embrace modern liberal ideas, Niebuhr's penetrating criticism of liberalism still holds true as it highlights the dangers of making ultimate claims or conclusions about organising society. We can never assume that liberal values are ultimate values, and we should never place our faith and our trust in a political system that claims to hold the ultimate solutions to society's problems. Liberal values are also

based on value judgements that developed under specific conditions within a particular context, which does not necessarily translate to all societies and all political systems. Furthermore, Niebuhr also argued that liberals cannot make any absolute claims for all societies, just as no theory of political systems and organising societies should make such final claims.

When Niebuhr sought different views on ordering society, he noticed something unique in the way in which a good functioning democracy includes broader and different perspectives within communities. Nevertheless, he did not think it was possible to find an ideal system of ordering society - not even democracy. He asserted that any broad, inclusive, tolerable, loyal, and universal system still faced the threat of being corrupted by self-love and self-interest due to the problem of human nature. Democracy must be based on the assumption that no person is good enough or wise enough to be trusted with irresponsible power over others. Even democratic solutions are never final or perfect, but should always be malleable and open to change as societies change. It remains a partial solution to problems that cannot be fully and comprehensively solved. In present day societies it is important to realise that no perfect solution exists; even the solutions that we do devise in one society will be different from those in other societies. Instead of imitating others, every society should find the most appropriate ways of dealing with the pressing issues they are faced with. This makes democracy appropriate as political system, since it is the most malleable and receptive to change when compared to alternative political systems. Throughout the world we find many different models and types of democratic systems that have been shaped and changed to suit particular contexts.

Although no perfect political system exists for solving societal problems, politics still mattered to Niebuhr and democracy was an instrument to help alleviate some of the injustices within society. This is partly why Niebuhr became involved in politics. He believed that politics is key to making a positive contribution towards societal change. This was evident in his own involvement in politics. He was active in political organisations, civic commissions, and partisan politics. His political work and thought

formed an essential part of everything he did, whether on the podium or on the pulpit, or through his religious and secular publications. Moreover, his political action was evident in the organisations that he joined or created, and even extended to becoming increasingly involved within government, not only as an advisor, but also as a critic. His involvement was possible because he lived in a democratic society that allowed for citizen participation. It is also through democratic means that he wanted to improve and to change what he viewed as unjust. Democracy gave him the scope and the opportunity to make a positive difference within society.

According to Niebuhr, democracy thus served as the necessary means for achieving a balance between those who did not want to get involved in politics and those who were overly optimistic about politics. Democracy also allowed Niebuhr's involvement in economic and social issues. It, therefore, disturbed Niebuhr that people with the democratic means to participate in politics, often instead choose to avoid politics. This can often be attributed to people's disillusionment with politics, electing the safer option of avoidance. Different religious groups, particularly Christian groups, usually shy away from political involvement. They often associate politics with immorality, the pursuit of power and self-interest. Religious groups may still engage and play an active role in society, but they disassociate themselves from political action because they do not regard politics as the appropriate platform from which to help and to care for others.

Lovin (1995: 159) explains Niebuhr's significance in his embrace of the ironies and the ambiguities in politics, as well as his understanding of the seriousness of social ethics. This is because he realised that democracy is a catalyst for achieving positive change. He was fearless in confronting conflict and opposition, because he realised that those political confrontations are actually necessary for finding instruments of social transformation. He was able to use different, and even conflicting, views and perspectives to supplement people's initial partial perspectives.

Niebuhr was very concerned with the apathetic behaviour of the church. He advocated greater involvement within politics, not because it could provide a final solution, but because it could make a positive difference. He believed that civil society, as well as

different organisations within society such as religious organisations and churches, could make a significant difference in the struggle against injustices, exploitations, and inequalities. He was also of the opinion that they could play a pivotal role in the formulation of policies that would promote greater social justice, because they had the necessary democratic tools at their disposal to achieve this. Greater involvement in politics through democracy is a way of pressuring societies and governments into doing what is morally right and just within society.

In the present day, owing to the increasing levels of inequality throughout the world, similar movements try to exert more pressure on governments and societies for social change through democratic means. The New Economic Forum (2013), for example, is an international institution that promotes greater private-public cooperation to improve the state of the world through engagement of business, political, academic, and other leaders worldwide. They value the importance of faith and religion, and state that:

[t]here is increasing interest in, and prominence of, faith and religious culture in public life, as well as a growing recognition of the contributions these can make to society. Faith communities are increasingly seen as integral to solving global problems and human security needs as influential authorities, trusted partners, service providers, community mobilizers and advocates. The role of faith is also important as a source and voice for values and morality that are widely perceived as lacking in modern, secular society (World Economic Forum 2013: 12).

Increasingly, more people tend to share Niebuhr's sentiments, especially in calling for a renewed focus on deep moral values within politics. Jim Wallis's (2014: 182) views, for example, resonate with Niebuhr's views when he writes:

Politics is secular, open to all people and citizens of any religious belief or none – as it is supposed to be that way. Theocracy is a threat to democracy, and religion is not meant to *control* the public square. Yet without moral values, the public square can become naked, as many have warned. And religion, when employed to serve politics rather than dominate it, can be one important source of those values. I believe in the separation of church and state but not in the segregation of moral values from public life.

Niebuhr effectively used his Christian resources and applied it to the political structures of societies. Through this he was able to justify and to defend democracy as a necessary instrument in the promotion of social justice.

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